

The Latin Lovers Bundle

The South American's Wife

Bought by Her Latin Lover

A Latin Passion



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Table of Contents

[The South American's Wife](#)
[By Kay Thorpe](#)

[Bought by Her Latin Lover](#)
[By Julia James](#)

[A Latin Passion](#)
[By Kathryn Ross](#)

The South American's Wife

By Kay Thorpe



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CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

CHAPTER ONE

SOFT but insistent, the sound of her name drew Karen out of a dreamless sleep. She opened her eyes to gaze for a blank moment or two at the unfamiliar, sun-filled room, her mind struggling to orientate itself.

Her eyes dropped to the lean, brown masculine hand covering hers where it lay on the white bed cover, travelling slowly up the length of a bronzed muscular arm to reach the face of the man seated at the bedside: a vital masculine face beneath thick black hair, short-cropped to control its curl.

‘So you’re back with us at last,’ he said in heavily accented English.

Mind still fogged, Karen eyed him in perplexity. ‘I don’t understand,’ she murmured, surprised to hear how weak her voice sounded. ‘What happened? Where am I?’

Some nameless expression flickered across the dark eyes. ‘You were involved in an accident and suffered a concussion,’ he said. ‘You’re in hospital here in Rio.’

The fog deepened. ‘Rio?’

‘Rio de Janeiro.’ He paused, brows drawing together. ‘Do you not remember?’

Karen stared at him in total confusion. Rio de Janeiro? That was in Brazil, wasn’t it? The farthest she’d ever been from home was Spain!

‘I don’t understand,’ she repeated helplessly. ‘Who are you?’

There was no immediate answer; the expression on the hard-boned face was disturbing. When he did speak it was in measured tones. ‘I’m Luiz Andrade. Your husband.’

She froze, eyes wide and dark, mind whirling. ‘I don’t have a husband,’ she got out. ‘What kind of game is this?’

The hand still covering hers tightened as she tried to draw it away. ‘The concussion has confused you. Relax, and everything will come back to you.’

‘No, it won’t, because it isn’t true!’ She pressed herself upright, wincing as pain shot through her head, but in no frame of mind to give way to it. ‘I’m Karen Downing! I live in London! I’ve never been to Rio de Janeiro in my life, and I’m certainly not married—to you or anyone!’

‘Hush! You must not agitate yourself this way.’ Looking concerned, he reached for the bell-push on the bedside table. ‘The doctor will give you something to calm you. When you waken, everything will be clear again.’

‘No!’ She tore her hand free, shrinking as far as she could get from this stranger, now on his feet and towering over her. ‘It’s all lies!’

‘Why would I lie?’ he asked. ‘For what possible reason would I claim to be your husband if it were not the truth?’

‘I don’t know!’ she flung back. ‘All I do know is that I never saw you before in my life!’

As if on cue, the door opened to admit a uniformed nurse. Looking from one to the other, she said something in a language totally foreign to Karen's ears, answered by the man claiming to be her husband in what appeared to be the same language.

'What did you tell her?' she demanded as the woman exited again.

'To fetch a doctor,' he said. 'You're obviously suffering from a temporary amnesia.'

'There's nothing temporary about it!' she claimed. 'Whatever this is about, you can forget it!' She glanced down at the white hospital smock she was wearing, then wildly about her. 'Where are my clothes?'

'The ones you were wearing at the time of the accident have been disposed of,' he said. 'Others will be brought when you're deemed fit to be discharged.'

'I want to go now!' she shot back at him. 'You can't keep me here against my will.'

Powerful shoulders lifted. 'To where would you go? You know no one in Rio.' A muscle jerked in the firm jawline as if he'd clamped his teeth together on some addition to that statement. 'Be patient,' he went on after a moment, 'and everything will be all right.'

He turned as the door opened again, this time to admit a white-coated doctor, addressing him in the same language he'd used with the nurse. Portuguese was the language spoken in Brazil; Karen knew that for a fact. She felt trapped in a never-ending nightmare.

The fight went out of her suddenly. She subsided on to the bed, unable to summon the strength of either mind or body to protest when the doctor produced a syringe. Sleep would be a welcome release from the turmoil in her head.

She opened her eyes again to soft lamplight, and for a moment imagined herself safe in her own bedroom, having fallen asleep reading as she often did.

Only it wasn't her room, and it hadn't been a dream, because the same man was seated at the bedside.

'How are you feeling now?' he asked.

Her voice came out low and ragged. 'Afraid.'

Face expressionless, he said, 'Do you know me?'

Karen shook her head, too demoralised by the realisation that the nightmare hadn't ended to summon any semblance of spirit.

'So what exactly *do* you remember?' he asked.

'I'm Karen Downing,' she said. 'I'm twenty-three years old, and I share a flat in London with a friend who works for the same firm. My parents were killed in a plane crash four years ago.'

That memory alone was enough to pierce her fragile control. She swallowed on the lump in her throat, recalling the agony of those days, weeks, months it had taken her to come to terms with her loss.

'This much I already know,' Luiz Andrade returned. 'What appears to have happened is that your mind has somehow blanked out the past three months of your life. The three months you've spent here in Brazil as my wife.' He paused again, as if gathering himself. 'We met at the hotel where you were spending a holiday. We were married within the week.'

'That's impossible!' Karen burst out. 'I'd never...'

She broke off, biting her lip. If she couldn't remember, how could she be sure of *what* she might have done? But three months! Three whole months missing from her life! It didn't seem possible!

'How did I get to Rio?' she asked, forcing herself to calm down a little. 'I couldn't afford a holiday in Brazil on my earnings.'

'You told me you had won a sum of money on your lottery, and decided to see something of the world outside of Europe while you had the opportunity.'

'So you didn't marry me on the assumption that I was rich,' she murmured, trying to make sense of the story.

The strong, sensual mouth slanted briefly. 'It was your beauty that attracted my eye, your personality that captured my heart.' He registered the expression that crossed her face with another humourless smile. 'You looked much the same way the first time I made my feelings clear to you—as if you doubted your power to stir a man to such a degree. Only when we made love did you begin to believe in me.'

Warmth rose beneath her skin as her eyes dropped involuntarily down the length of his body to the lean hips and long legs clad in close-fitting white jeans, the stirring deep down in the pit of her stomach no fluke of imagination.

'You were a virgin,' he went on softly. 'That in itself would have been enough to seal my fate. It was fortunate that you felt for me too, because I would not easily have let you go.'

It had to be true, Karen thought desperately. As he'd said before, what possible reason could he have to lie? If only she could find even the slightest kink in the blanket cloaking her mind!

'You said we were married within a week of meeting?' she ventured.

'Just five days, to be precise. For me, it would have been sooner, but there were necessary formalities to be observed. We travelled to my home in São Paulo the following day.'

Karen's brows were drawn in the effort to recall, but there wasn't even a glimmer. 'You're saying I never went back home at all?'

'There seemed no need when you had so little to return for. Your friend was contacted, and your place of work.'

'But my things!'

'Most of which you had with you. The apartment apparently was rented. The few items you did express a desire to have were despatched by your friend.'

Karen absorbed the information in silence for a moment, trying to imagine Julie's reaction to the news. 'It must have been a tremendous shock for her,' she said at length.

'I imagine it was. You're still in touch with her, if you feel the ring you wear isn't verification enough.'

Karen raised her hand slowly to gaze at the wide gold band, shaking her head in numb acceptance. 'I believe you. I *have* to believe you! It's just so difficult to take in.'

'It must be.' Luiz leaned forward to ease his position, lips twisting as she flinched. 'You have nothing to fear. Retribution is farthest from my mind.'

Karen felt her heart jerk. 'Retribution?' she got out. 'For what?'

It was apparent from the expression in the dark eyes that he regretted having said what he had. 'There are matters perhaps best left alone for the present,' he declared. 'The problems are many already without adding to them.'

‘I want to know what you meant,’ she insisted, every nerve in her body on edge. ‘I have a right to know!’

The hesitation was brief, the lift of his shoulders signifying resignation. ‘Very well. You came to Rio in the company of a man named Lucio Fernandes, with whom you had apparently been carrying on an affair. I followed you in order to bring you back, but the accident happened before I even reached the city. Perhaps fortunately,’ he added on a harder note, ‘or I may have been driven to measures that would have done none of us any good.’

Karen had difficulty finding any words at all. An affair? She’d been having an affair!

‘Are you sure?’ she asked faintly.

The firm mouth acquired a cynical slant. ‘Why else would you have run away with the man?’

‘I don’t know,’ she admitted. And then with a flash of spirit, ‘But if it is true, why on earth would you have wanted me back?’

‘What is mine remains mine.’ The statement was all the more compelling for its lack of force. ‘There has never been, nor ever will be, a divorce in the Andrade family—no matter what the provocation.’

Karen felt a sudden shiver run down her spine. She made a valiant effort to regain control of herself.

‘So where is he, this Lucio Fernandes?’

‘Vanished, like the coward he is!’ The contempt was searing. ‘You were alone when the medics reached you.’

‘Reached me where?’

‘At the road outside the airport where you were hit by a car. It was fortunate that your bag wasn’t stolen while you lay unconscious. Once your identity was proven, news was relayed to our home, then passed to me on landing.’ His jaw contracted. ‘You were unconscious for almost two hours. It was feared that your skull was fractured.’

Karen considered the foregoing, feeling ever more confused. ‘You said the news was passed to you on landing?’

‘I set out after you the moment I became aware of your departure this morning,’ Luiz acknowledged. ‘You’d taken your passport, but I doubted that you would have gone straight to the international airport in case of pursuit. I was right. Unfortunately, I was fifteen minutes too late to catch you at Congonhas. I took the next flight to Rio. Having first checked that Fernandes was on the plane too,’ he added, anticipating the question hovering on her lips. ‘There was no mistake.’

‘I’m...sorry.’ It was totally inadequate, but all she could come up with for the moment.

The dark head inclined. ‘I’m the one who should be sorry. I shouldn’t have told you all this so soon.’ He got to his feet, body lithe as a panther’s. ‘You must rest. I’ll see you again in the morning.’

Stranger or not, she didn’t want him to go. At least while he was here she could keep on asking the questions crowding her mind—keep on hoping for that breakthrough.

‘I can’t stay here!’ she exclaimed on a note of desperation.

‘You have to stay.’ His tone brooked no argument. ‘At least until we can be sure you suffered no deeper damage. Perhaps a night’s sleep will restore you.’

He didn’t believe that any more than she did, Karen reckoned. Whatever the reason for her memory loss, it was going to take more than a night’s sleep to restore it. In the meantime, she had no other recourse but to do as he said.

Thankfully, he made no attempt to touch her in any way, but simply lifted a hand in farewell. She watched him go to the door, appraising the tapering line from broad shoulder to narrow waist and hip. A fine figure of a man in any language. She had lain in his arms, known the intimate intrusion of his body. How could any woman forget that? How could any woman forget *him*?

The nurse who came in after he'd gone was different from the one before, but kindness itself. She insisted on helping Karen across to the *en suite* bathroom. A welcome hand, Karen found when she stood up.

There was a full length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. The face looking back at her was pale, throwing into sharp contrast the purpling bruise at the temple. The wide-spaced green eyes looked bruised too, the soft, full mouth vulnerable. There was some grazing across cheek and jawline, though superficial enough to make any scarring unlikely.

If nothing else had convinced her of the passage of time, the couple of inches her hair had grown since she last recalled looking at it would have done so. Natural silver-blonde in colour, it fell curtain straight to her shoulders.

Luiz would be in his early thirties, she calculated. The kind of man most women would find devastatingly attractive, she had to acknowledge. She could well imagine the impact he would have had on her at first sight: an impact deep enough to make her willing to give up everything she'd ever known just to be with him.

Which made the idea of her having had an affair with another man within three months of marrying him even harder to believe.

The nurse waiting outside knocked on the door. 'You are well?' she called.

Karen gathered herself together. There was nothing to be gained from standing here grappling with matters she had no knowledge of. All she could hope for was eventual enlightenment.

A sleeping pill gave her a good night's rest, but morning brought no change. Awake at five-thirty, with little of yesterday's physical unsteadiness left, she got up to take a shower and wash her hair. She had no make-up to hand, and nothing but the gown left by last night's nurse to put on, but at least she felt bodily refreshed.

Where she went from here she had no clear idea. She was married to a man she not only didn't remember, but whose trust she had apparently betrayed. Even if he was prepared to take her back, could she bear to go with him?

Yet what other choice did she have when it came right down to it? She had neither home nor job to return to in England, even if she still had the means left to get there.

Back in the bedroom, she drew the window blind to look out on a picture postcard view of sparkling white skyscrapers and green parks stretching down to a sea the same deep blue as the great bowl of sky above it. Rising from a jutting peninsula, the conical shape of Sugar Loaf Mountain was recognisable from a multitude of travelogues.

Built up here in the foothills of the backing mountains, this was no common or garden hospital, Karen realised—something she should have known already from the standard of both furnishings and facilities. Luiz Andrade was obviously a man of some means.

She dismissed the idea that that might have had something to do with her readiness to marry him. If the very thought of it turned her stomach now, it would certainly have done the same then.

Breakfast was brought by yet another nurse, who spoke no English at all. Karen picked at the fruit and cereal, mind still going around in circles. Physically she was surely well enough to leave the hospital today, which made it imperative that she come to terms with her predicament.

Luiz Andrade was her husband. That much she had to accept. What concerned her the most at present was what he might expect from her. She had no idea of a wife's rights here. For all she knew, he could be within his in demanding an immediate resumption of marital relations, regardless of her condition. There had been an element of ruthlessness about him last night when he'd spoken of what he might have done had he caught up with her missing lover. It wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that she might have suffered some form of retribution herself before being dragged back to wherever it was that they lived.

She was in a state bordering on panic by the time Luiz put in an appearance. He was wearing the same white jeans and shirt—both items freshly washed and pressed from the look of it.

'I brought no change of clothing,' he said, correctly interpreting the unspoken question. 'There was no time. The hotel where I spent the night provides laundry facilities.' He studied her, dark eyes revealing nothing of his thoughts. 'How do you feel now?'

'Much the same,' she acknowledged, fighting the urge to throw a wobbly. 'Mentally, at any rate. Physically, I don't think there's a great deal wrong with me.'

'We'll allow the doctors to decide that.' He moved to take a seat on the edge of the bed itself, registering her involuntary movement with a narrowing of his lips. 'You certainly look more yourself this morning. Apart from the bruising, of course. Is your head very painful still?'

'Only if I move it too sharply.' Karen was doing her best to maintain a stiff upper lip, vitally aware of the warmth radiating from the well-honed body. 'I'd feel a whole world better for a touch of lipstick!'

'You have no need of cosmetics to enhance your looks,' he declared. 'Your hair alone is colour enough.'

'I washed it,' she said, desperate to keep the conversation on an inconsequential level. 'It was filthy.'

'Hardly surprising after being dragged in the dust.' Luiz put up a hand to tuck a still damp strand back from her cheek, refusing this time to be put off by her jerky movement. 'Is my touch so obnoxious to you?'

'It's an automatic reflex,' she said. 'Nothing personal. I just can't get my head round this whole situation.'

'I find it difficult myself,' he admitted. 'You gave no indication that you no longer found my attentions desirable. Our lovemaking the very night before you left was—'

'Don't!' Karen was trembling, the muscle spasm high in her inner thighs a hint that her body might remember what her mind did not. 'Can't we talk about something else?'

'What would you suggest?' he asked drily.

She cast around. 'Your home?'

'*Our* home,' Luiz corrected. 'The home to which we shall be returning.' He shifted from the bed to the chair he had occupied the night before, face expressionless again. 'São Paulo is many kilometres from here, the city the largest in Brazil, the state one of the richest. Guavada is a cattle ranch lying to the northwest of the city.'

Nothing of what he was telling her meant anything. A cattle ranch!

'You're a manager or something?' she hazarded.

About to answer, Luiz broke off as the door opened to admit the same white-coated doctor from the night before, getting to his feet to greet the man.

The latter came to examine the bruise on Karen's temple, shining a torch into each eye before finally pronouncing himself satisfied with her condition.

'You are fortunate,' he said, 'that the damage was no worse.'

'I don't see amnesia as a light matter,' she retorted. 'Have you any idea how long it might last?'

The man hesitated, obviously reluctant to commit himself to a prognosis. 'Your memory could return at any time,' he said at length. 'Shock can do many things to the mind. You must be patient and try not to worry about it.'

Easy enough to say, Karen reflected hollowly. How could she *not* worry about it?

Luiz walked with the man to the door, returning to announce that she was cleared to leave the hospital.

'Your bag will be brought for you to select fresh clothing,' he said. 'Shall you need help in dressing?'

'No!' The denial came out sharper than she had intended, drawing another of the cynical smiles.

'I was thinking of a nurse's assistance, not my own.'

'I'm sorry.' She made a helpless little gesture. 'It isn't that I don't trust you.'

'Is it not?' he asked softly. 'Can you truly claim to believe that every word I've spoken is the truth?'

'I have to believe it,' she said. 'I don't have any other choice.'

'No,' he agreed, 'you don't. Just as I have no other choice.'

He had gone before Karen could summon the strength for any further exchange. Not that there was a great deal left to say. She was going with him because she had nowhere else to go. To what exactly she had still to discover.

The leather suitcase that arrived a few moments later was accompanied by a leather handbag, neither of which she recognised. She rifled swiftly through the contents of the latter, finding a passport in her married name, along with a wallet containing a wad of foreign currency.

She had no idea of the worth. Nor did it make a great deal of difference to the present state of affairs. What she did wonder was just what plan she and this Lucio Fernandes had supposedly made.

There was nothing in the handbag to provide an answer to that question. She opened the suitcase, disconcerted by the jumble of clothing inside. Packed hastily and with little regard to content from the look of it, which suggested a decision made bare minutes before departure rather than a planned exit. Stuck in the middle of it all was a framed photograph that brought a lump to her throat. It had been taken on a camping holiday bare months before her parents had been killed. They were laughing together, holding up the tiny fish her mother had just caught in the river flowing behind them. A handsome pair, with everything to live for.

Julie would have sent it through along with the other things she'd asked for, Karen concluded, blinking the tears from her eyes. It would have been the last thing she'd have left behind, for certain.

She sorted out a pair of lace panties and matching bra, topping them with a white skirt and sleeveless cotton top she'd never to her knowledge seen before. There were only two pairs of shoes. She chose the pale beige sandals that were the only ones with a highish heel. At five feet six she was far from short, but she needed the boost to face a man over six feet in height with any degree of confidence at all.

The handbag yielded a pouch containing a pale pink lipstick, smoky eye-shadow and a mascara wand. No surprises there: she'd never used a lot of make-up. She donned the touch of lipstick she'd spoken of, and ran a comb through her dried hair. The bruising looked worse than it had the night before, as did the grazes on her cheek and jaw, but she had more to think about than her appearance.

Her last clear memories were of attending a leaving party for a workmate, followed by dinner out with a group from the office. Julie had been out herself when she had got back to the flat. She'd made a hot drink and gone straight to bed.

That had been the twelfth of September. The day before yesterday, so far as her mind was concerned. Luiz had said they'd been married three months, but that didn't tell her the date now.

He supplied an answer to that question on his return.

'It's the twenty-seventh of January,' he said. 'More than halfway through our summer. The temperatures on the plateau are milder than here on the coast. While the days are hot at this time of the year, the humidity is low, the nights refreshingly cool.'

'It sounds good.' Karen was doing her utmost to stay on top of her emotions.

Luiz came to close and lock the suitcase she'd left open on the bed, hoisting it effortlessly up. 'I have a taxi waiting to take us to the hotel.'

'Hotel?' she queried.

'I think it better that the two of us spend some time together before returning to Guavada,' he said. 'We have a great deal to discuss.'

Karen forced herself into movement, reluctant to abandon the only bit of security she knew right now. Luiz went ahead to open the door for her, falling into step at her side to traverse a short, beautifully tiled corridor to a bank of lifts.

The one that arrived silently and smoothly in answer to his summons was empty. They descended without speaking, to emerge in a luxuriously appointed lobby. The receptionist on duty at a central desk bade them a smiling farewell, expressing what Karen took to be good wishes for the future. A forlorn hope indeed while the past months remained a blank.

Although it was still only a little after nine-thirty, the temperature outside was already soaring. Karen was glad to dive into the air-conditioned taxi-cab. With the suitcase stowed, Luiz slid in beside her. His thigh lay next to hers, the firm muscularity clearly defined beneath the fine cotton of his jeans when he moved.

Stripped, he would be magnificent, came the unbidden thought, bringing a sudden contraction deep down in the pit of her stomach. She would have seen him like that for certain—as he had no doubt seen her. She wondered how she, so unpractised in full-blown lovemaking, had managed to satisfy a man who would certainly have been no virgin.

They drove down through a city humming with workaday energies to a luxury hotel overlooking a superb crescent of white beach that was already heavily populated. Sugar Loaf reared now to the left, outlined against a sky beginning to cloud over a little.

'Is it going to rain, do you think?' Karen asked, turning from the balconied window—more for something to say than through any real interest in the weather. 'Summer is the rainy season out here, isn't it?'

Watching her from across the superbly furnished and decorated room, Luiz inclined his head. 'It is, yes.' His regard was penetrating. 'You recall that much then?'

'Not the way you mean,' she said. 'I must have read it somewhere.'

'Then the view out there means nothing to you?'

Karen's brows drew together. 'I've seen it in pictures.'

'But no more than that?'

'No.' Heart thudding against her ribcage, she added, 'What else might it mean?'

'It's the view you had from your room in this same hotel three months ago,' he said. 'Not the same room, I admit, but a replica of it. I hoped it might strike some spark of recollection.'

‘It hasn’t.’ Her tone was flat. ‘I must have won quite a lot to afford to stay in a place like this.’

‘Several thousand pounds, I believe. A one-time opportunity to see how the other half lived, was how you excused the extravagance. There would have been little left to take home with you, for certain.’

‘Except that I found myself a husband who *could* afford to stay in places like this.’ She made a gesture of self-disgust. ‘Forget I said that, will you?’

The dark head inclined again. ‘It’s forgotten.’

Considering his expression a moment ago, Karen doubted it. If she wanted to alienate him any more than he already must be alienated, considering the reason he’d followed her to Rio, she was going the right way about it.

He was leaning against a chest of drawers on the far side of the queen-size twin beds. Karen could only be thankful that there were two of them—although the thought of sharing even a room with him was daunting.

‘I have the room next door,’ he said, reading her mind with an ease she found daunting in itself. ‘I’ve no intention of pressuring you into anything you find distasteful.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Karen scarcely knew what else to say. ‘It isn’t that I find you...unattractive.’

‘A start, at least.’ His tone was dry. ‘Patience is no particular virtue of mine, but it seems I must learn to employ it. Perhaps sight of our home will help.’

‘Perhaps.’ Karen hesitated, reluctant to put the idea in his mind if it wasn’t there already, yet needing reassurance. ‘You don’t think I’m pretending to have lost my memory, do you?’

His expression underwent an indefinable alteration. ‘What might cause you to do such a thing?’

She lifted her shoulders. ‘Fear of retribution, perhaps.’

‘You see me as a wife-beater?’

‘I don’t know what you’re capable of.’ She was beginning to wish she’d kept her mouth shut. ‘It isn’t true, anyway. If I were capable of putting on that kind of act, I’d belong on the stage!’

‘I believe you would.’ His shoulders lifted. ‘There have been moments in our relationship when you’ve sorely tried me, I admit.’

Karen eyed him in silence for a moment. ‘We had rows?’

‘We had some differences of opinion. You’re a strong-willed young woman.’

‘Where I come from, *all* women have minds of their own,’ she claimed.

‘As do Brazilian women—except that they are rather more subtle in their employment of it.’ The pause was brief, the sudden change of tone emphatic. ‘We have to put this behind us, and begin again.’ He held up a staying hand as Karen started to speak. ‘I’ll arrange a hire car and show you the sights—the way I did when we first met. Perhaps then things will start to come back to you.’

He straightened away from the chest, turning towards the door. ‘Come to the lobby in half an hour.’

Karen stood where she was for several moments after he’d left the room, mulling over everything that had been said. There were still so many questions to be answered, and only Luiz to supply those answers.

But was what he told her the whole truth? Why had she felt the need to turn to another man at all?

CHAPTER TWO

THE limousine Luiz had hired was already waiting for them outside when she went down. He put her into the front passenger seat before going round to slide behind the wheel.

He had shown her the sights this way when they'd first met, he'd said upstairs. If the hotel itself, plus the view from the window, had failed to stir her memory, it was unlikely that this was going to work either, but it was worth a try, Karen supposed. Anything was worth trying!

They headed for the mountains backing the city, leaving the congested streets to enter a world of tropical rainforest where thick lianas hung like pythons from tree branches furry with moss. The tangled canopy far above filtered out the sunlight, casting an eerie green glow over writhing creepers and huge tree ferns. There were flowers in abundance, their colours jewel-like among the foliage.

Karen was mesmerised, hardly able to believe that they were still within the city limits.

'It's like another planet!' she exclaimed, viewing a begonia bush bursting with bright yellow blossom and smothered in bees. 'What's making all the noise?'

'Monkeys,' Luiz advised. 'We invade their territory. This is the Terra da Tijuca, Rio's national park. It spreads over a hundred or more square miles.'

'It's wonderful!'

He cast a swift sideways glance at her rapt face. 'But in no way familiar?'

'No.' The enthusiasm faded as reality reared its head again. 'To the best of my knowledge, I've never seen any of this before.'

She sank back into her seat, head against the rest, eyes closed. 'I feel I'm living someone else's life!'

'I can assure you you're not,' Luiz responded. 'Your memory will return when you're ready to remember.'

Karen stole a glance at the hard-edged profile, feeling the fast-becoming-familiar tension in her lower body. 'Supposing that's never?'

His jaw compressed momentarily. 'Then we accept matters the way they are and live our lives accordingly.'

'I'm not sure I *can* accept it,' she said, and saw the compression come again.

'There's no other way.'

It was obvious that any further protest on her part would be a waste of time and breath, Karen acknowledged silently. Whatever she'd done, she was his wife and she was staying his wife.

Topped by the towering white statue of Christ, the granite peak of Corcovado afforded a panoramic view over both city and coastline. The skyscrapers below were reduced in size to toytown dimensions, the beaches of Copacabana and Impanema to curving crescents of white dotted with ants. Karen was overwhelmed by the sheer spectacle.

'You were equally impressed the first time you saw it,' said Luiz, watching her face as she gazed at the scene. 'As you were with everything.'

'Including yourself,' she murmured.

'Including myself,' he agreed. 'As I intended you to be.'

'How long did I hold out?'

Dark brows lifted. 'Hold out?'

'Before you got me into bed with you?'

It was a moment before he answered, his tone quizzical. 'Does it matter to you?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I need to know.'

His shrug was brief. 'We made love on the first night of our acquaintance.'

Karen swallowed. 'You must have thought me the easiest conquest you'd ever made!'

'No such thought entered my mind,' he denied. 'We were two people drawn by the same overwhelming force.'

She couldn't bring herself to meet the dark eyes full on. 'Would you still have wanted to marry me if I'd had previous experience?'

'I would have accepted it, yes.'

Karen looked at him then, oblivious to the other people on the platform. An arm resting against the guard rail, head outlined against the sky, he looked at ease in a way she envied. She had a sudden urge to disrupt that equanimity.

'Tell me about Lucio Fernandes,' she said with deliberation. 'Who exactly is he?'

She gained her wish as his face hardened. 'I prefer not to speak of him.'

'We *have* to talk about him,' she insisted.

Straightened now away from the rail, Luiz studied her for a moment in silence. When he spoke it was in tautly controlled tones. 'There's little enough I can tell you of his background. He was employed by one of my foremen. Had I had any notion...' He broke off, gritting his teeth together. 'Suffice to say he would have been in no fit state to arouse *any* woman's interest!'

Karen's chest felt tight as a drum. Luiz Andrade was a proud man; it didn't take intimate knowledge to be aware of that. The discovery that his wife had been having an affair at all would have hit him hard enough, but for her to have become involved with a mere employee!

'I'm still not convinced it's the truth,' she said defensively. 'What actual proof do you have that there was any affair to start with?'

Amber lights glinted in the depths of his eyes. 'What proof do I need other than that you provided yourself in running off with him?'

'There had to be some prior signs, surely?'

'There apparently were, had I been willing to see them. Beatriz suspected, but failed to warn me.'

Karen put up an involuntary hand to her temple as pain lanced briefly through it. There was an odd buzzing in her ears, a sense of being drawn somewhere she didn't want to go.

Luiz moved swiftly to catch her as she swayed, arms sliding about her to hold her close. She could feel the strong beat of his heart at her breast, the sun-stoked heat of his body.

‘I’m all right now,’ she managed. ‘Just a bit of a dizzy spell, that’s all.’

He made no attempt to stop her as she pulled away from him. ‘I should have refused to discuss the matter,’ he said. ‘This isn’t the place.’

What attention they’d drawn from those in the vicinity had now been returned to the scenery. Karen tilted her head to let the breeze cool her cheeks, both hands on the guardrail to steady herself.

‘Who is Beatriz?’

Luiz made a curt gesture. ‘As I said, this isn’t the place. We’ll return to the hotel.’

She made no protest. The name had meant something to her, that was obvious, but there was no further break in the curtain.

It was well into the afternoon when they reached the hotel again. Luiz accepted Karen’s plea that she was tired and needed rest rather than food without demur, simply saying that he would see her later.

A shower was a first priority on reaching her room. She luxuriated for several minutes in the glass-walled cabinet, blanking out everything but the feel of the water streaming over her skin.

Towelled dry, she donned the robe provided and returned to the bedroom to extract fresh underwear from the suitcase. There seemed little point in unpacking fully when she had no idea how long they would be here.

Her throat closed up at the thought of what she would be facing when they did return to the ranch. However much she might want to disbelieve it, all the evidence pointed to the fact that she really had been having an affair with another man.

Where would she have been now, she wondered, if there had been no accident? What kind of life would she have had with a man capable of leaving her lying unconscious in the road? How could she have been drawn to another man at all when she was married to one as charismatic as Luiz Andrade?

Unless Luiz wasn’t the man *he* appeared to be either. How could she be sure what their marital relationship had really been like? There had been rows, that much he’d admitted. She only had his word that there had been no serious rift between them.

He left her alone until eight, by which time she had begun to wonder if he had deserted her after all. When he did put in an appearance he was wearing a light linen suit that sat on his frame as if made to measure.

‘I felt the need of fresh clothing,’ he said. ‘You at least have that facility.’ He ran an appraising glance over her slender curves in the lilac silk tunic that had been one of the few items in the suitcase she considered suitable for dining out. ‘Did you rest well?’

Karen turned away, unable to hold his gaze for long. ‘As well as can be expected, considering. What happens now?’

‘We have dinner here in the hotel. If we repeat, as far as is possible, the details of our time here together, perhaps it will stir something in your memory.’

‘*Every* detail?’ she asked after a moment.

‘I said as far as is possible,’ he responded. ‘I make no demands on you.’

‘For now,’ she murmured, and heard him draw a roughened breath.

‘Do you think me so easily able to banish the thought of you with Fernandas from my head? Whenever I close my eyes I see you in his arms!’

Karen made herself look at him, seeing the anger glittering his eyes. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said wretchedly. ‘I wasn’t thinking.’ She paused, searching for words. ‘Do you think you ever will be able to put it aside?’

‘If not I must learn to live with it.’ He was in control again, though his voice remained taut. ‘The marriage will not be dissolved.’

There was nothing she could say to that. Nothing likely to help the situation. But there were still so many things she needed to know.

‘This morning you mentioned someone called Beatriz,’ she ventured. ‘Who is she?’

Something flickered deep in the dark eyes. ‘She’s the wife of my brother, Raymundo.’

The latter name struck no chord either. ‘Does he work on the ranch too?’

‘He and Beatriz have their home there,’ came the somewhat ambiguous reply. ‘As does my young sister too. Regina was devastated by your leaving.’

Karen sank to a seat, her legs no longer supportive. Just how many people *would* she be facing on her return to the home she had fled?

‘How old is Regina?’ she asked.

‘Eighteen now.’

Green eyes lifted to view the incisive features. ‘And Raymundo?’

‘Twenty-eight. Four years younger than myself. There was another brother between us in age, but he died some two years ago.’

Empathy came swiftly, born of her own loss. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘You never knew him.’ Luiz moved abruptly, crossing to open a cabinet Karen hadn’t attempted to explore. ‘I think we’re both in need of a stimulant.’

He poured a colourless liquid for them both, bringing both glasses back to where she sat to thrust one into her hand. Not gin, she realised, putting it to her lips, but white rum. The spirit burned her throat, but she finished it, glad of the immediate effect. Alcohol was no solution to her problems, for certain, but it helped take the edge off them.

‘What about parents?’ she said.

‘I lost my father some years ago. My mother married again, and now lives in Brasilia.’

Karen viewed the empty glass in her hand with lacklustre eyes. ‘Have we met?’

‘Just the once, when I took you to visit her.’

‘Did she approve? Of the marriage, I mean?’

‘No.’ His tone was unemotional. ‘She would have preferred that I marry a woman of my own race.’

‘That’s understandable.’

‘It’s of no consequence.’ His own glass also drained, he took hers from her unresisting hand, depositing both on the nearest surface. ‘Enough questions for now. You need to eat.’

Food was the farthest thing from her mind, but she rose obediently to her feet. It would be embarrassing going into a restaurant looking like this, she acknowledged, catching sight of her face in a nearby wall mirror, but there was little to be done about it.

There were others in the lift descending to the ground floor. Karen could feel the glances. If Luiz was aware of them too, he gave no sign. The subdued lighting in the restaurant afforded some comfort. All the same, it was a relief to gain the relative privacy of the alcove table.

There was nothing in the least bit familiar about the plush surroundings. She hadn't really expected there to be. She left it to Luiz to choose her meal, eating what was put in front of her without tasting a thing. The wine he'd ordered went straight to her head. She drank only half a glass, afraid of losing her grip altogether.

'This isn't going to work,' she said bleakly over coffee. She cast a glance at the man seated opposite, senses stirred by his dark masculinity. 'I don't think anything is.'

'There's nothing to be lost by trying,' he said. 'From here we went to a club.' His gaze was on her face. 'And then back to the hotel.'

Karen felt a pulse throb suddenly at her temple, setting her heart pounding in empathy. She tried desperately to grasp the image that fled through her mind.

'What is it?' Luiz's voice was low but urgent. 'Do you remember?'

She slowly shook her head. 'Just a feeling for a moment. Nothing concrete.'

'But it meant *something* to you, that was apparent.'

'It seems so.' She studied the vital features, wishing she could tell what he was thinking right now. 'Does everyone know about Lucio Fernandes?'

The glitter sprang in his eyes for a moment, then subsided again. 'Beatriz is the only one with that information.'

'You trust her to keep it to herself?'

'She had better do so. Regina believes you left merely because of dissidence between us. Your amnesia will be difficult enough for her to accept.'

Not nearly as difficult as it was for her, Karen thought. Recollection might not be palatable, but it had to be better than this blankness.

'We could always try keeping it a secret,' she said, and saw his lips thin.

'You find the situation one to treat with flippancy?'

She made a small apologetic gesture. 'No, of course not. It's just...' She paused, swallowing thickly. 'Have you any idea what it's like to sit here and listen to you telling me about people and places and matters I've absolutely no concept of? The person I seem to have become bears no relationship to the person I believe myself to be. It's like looking in a mirror and seeing someone else's reflection!'

Luiz inclined his head, face set. 'Difficult for both of us. To be deceived is bad, but to be forgotten...'

He left it there, lifting a hand to signal to the waiter. Up to now, Karen had been too involved with her own feelings to give any real thought to what he must be going through. She tried to put herself in his shoes, to imagine how it must feel to be wiped completely from her mind after months of living together as husband and wife. What man could handle that with equanimity?

She watched him sign the bill that was brought to the table. Those lean, long-fingered hands would know every inch of her, came the thought, sending a *frisson* the length of her spine. In three months she

would no doubt have got over any inhibitions she might have had herself: the way her body was reacting at this moment gave every indication of it. She might not remember loving this man, but she was vitally attracted by him. Whatever had driven her to seek another man's arms, it couldn't have been because Luiz no longer stirred her.

She made an effort to compose herself as the waiter departed, to meet the eyes raised to her. 'What now?' she asked.

'As I said before, we follow the same pattern.'

'You really think it's going to help?'

'Whatever chance there is of stirring something in your memory, we must take,' he stated. He got to his feet, rounding the table to draw out her chair. 'The night is still young.'

It was gone ten o'clock, Karen saw from the thin gold watch on his wrist as she rose. Handsome, charismatic, obviously not without money, it could be said that Luiz Andrade was everything any woman could possibly want. Yet she had left him for a man whose backbone, it seemed, was so weak he had left her lying in the road. It didn't make sense.

They took a taxi to what appeared at first sight to be a large private residence. Luiz handed over a card in the well-appointed entrance hall, and they were duly signed in to wander at will through rooms devoted to various pastimes.

Luiz ignored the crowded casino, leading the way to a smaller, dimly lit room where couples swayed to the beat of an excellent four-piece combo. There were tables set around the periphery of the room, but he ignored those too, drawing her on to the floor and into his arms.

Held against the hard male body, Karen concentrated on matching her steps to his. She felt his hand warm at her centre back, his breath stirring the hair at her temple. Her mouth was in line with the hollow of his throat, revealed by the open neckline of his shirt; the male scent of him tantalised her nostrils.

All sensations of the present not the past, she told herself. Luiz was a man to whom any woman with an ounce of red blood in her veins would respond. Perhaps if they actually made love...

She rejected the thought immediately. Even if she could bring herself to try such an experiment, Luiz almost certainly wouldn't with the images he'd spoken of earlier crowding his mind. He had followed her to Rio with the intention of fetching her back because his pride wouldn't allow him any other course, but that wasn't to say he'd have been prepared to make love to her again.

'Could it have worked even if I hadn't lost my memory?' she heard herself ask. 'Forcing me back, I mean.'

It was a moment or two before Luiz answered. When he did speak his tone was unemotional. 'I would have found it difficult to put your transgressions aside, I admit. Trust isn't easily restored.'

'But you still wouldn't have been prepared to finish it?'

'No. Marriage, in my eyes, is for life. The reason why I waited so long to find the woman I could live that life with.'

'Only she let you down,' Karen said huskily. 'I can't tell you how awful it makes me feel to think I'm capable of that kind of behaviour! I still find it hard to believe I *could* be capable of it.'

'There was no mistake,' he said. 'Only the one you made in choosing a man who cared so little for you that he left you sprawled in the dust.'

Karen rode the hurt as best as she was able. 'What's even harder to explain is why a man like that would have abandoned a good job.'

Luiz gave a short laugh. 'Fear of what would happen to him when I discovered the affair would have been incentive enough.'

'In which case,' she pursued, 'why would he have taken the risk in the first place?'

The laugh came again. 'You do yourself an injustice. Few men could remain indifferent to you. You were a virgin when we met only because you'd never known one capable of bringing the fires smouldering within you to life. I could have taken you within minutes of our meeting.'

'So why didn't you?' she challenged.

'Because I wanted more than just your body.' His voice had softened in reminiscence. 'I wanted every part of you.'

All thought suspended, Karen felt heat rising through her from a central core, a spreading weakness in her limbs. Her body moved instinctively against him, pressing closer to his hardness.

'Stop that!' he said harshly.

She came back to earth with a jolt as reality raised its ugly head again, her face flaming as she looked up into the sparking dark eyes.

'It wasn't intentional,' she stammered. 'It just...happened.'

His lip curled. 'The way it just happened with Fernandas?'

'How can I know?' she asked wretchedly. 'How can I know anything for certain? All I have to go on is what you tell me.'

Luiz stopped moving, the spark grown to a blaze. 'Are you accusing me of lying to you?'

'No, of course not. But unless this Lucio Fernandas had money of his own, none of it adds up. The money I had on me almost certainly wouldn't have been enough to take the two of us very far.'

'So why else would the two of you have been on the same flight? Why else, for that matter, would you have been on the flight at all?'

Karen shook her head, feeling ever more desperate. 'I can't answer that. All I do know is...'

'Is?' he prompted as she broke off.

What she'd been about to say was that she simply couldn't visualise walking out on someone who could make her feel the way he'd made her feel just now, but she wasn't ready to go down that particular road.

'Nothing,' she said. 'Can we call it a day? I have a dreadful headache.'

Anger gave way to concern. 'The fault is mine for insisting on continuing the attempt. I'll arrange for a taxi to be called.'

He was solicitousness itself while they waited for the taxi to arrive. Karen hadn't lied about the headache; it felt as if a hammer was beating at the space between her eyes. And this was just the beginning. There was worse to come. Facing the rest of the family would tax her resources to the limit.

It was coming up to midnight when they reached the hotel. Luiz had the receptionist on duty procure some painkillers and a glass of water for her before taking the lift to their floor.

'I trust the headache will soon subside,' he said at her door. For a moment he seemed to hesitate, his eyes on her pale face, then he said a brief goodnight and moved on to the room next door.

Thankful to be alone at last, Karen shed her clothing and took a shower. The bathroom was lined in mirror glass. She studied herself clinically as she towelled dry. Breasts high, waist slim, hips smoothly rounded, her body was, she knew from past experience, a magnet for male eyes, her face, in normal times, an equal draw. She'd had several short-term romances, but had lost hope of ever meeting any man who could make her want him the way he wanted her.

Until coming here to Rio and meeting Luiz Andrade. The very thought of him sent a ripple down her spine. The mistake she'd probably made then was in confusing lust with love. A mistake she must have realised eventually.

Regardless, she just couldn't imagine herself turning to another man for solace. Especially one like this Lucio Fernandes. Could she possibly have been so desperate that she'd cultivate a relationship with him simply to secure his help in getting away from Guavada?

She was going round in circles again, she acknowledged wearily, and still getting nowhere. The only chance she had of learning the truth was by returning to Guavada. Not that she had any choice in the matter anyway.

Worn out, she slept like a log, awakening to sunlight and a low-pitched ringing that turned out to be the telephone on the bedside cabinet.

'How are you feeling?' Luiz asked.

'Better,' she said, referring to the headache not the inner turbulence. 'What time is it?'

'Gone ten o'clock. You missed breakfast, but I can have something brought to the room.'

She wasn't hungry, Karen started to say, breaking off as her stomach growled a protest. 'Give me ten minutes,' she said instead.

'What would you like?'

'Fruit and coffee will be fine.'

She put the receiver down, wondering how she could speak so calmly and collectedly when her insides were dancing a fandango at the mere sound of his voice. They'd made love the night before her departure, he'd said yesterday. If it was the truth, whatever had gone wrong between them hadn't affected her physical responses even at that point.

Showered, she donned the white robe and went to open up the balcony doors with the intention of eating outside. She closed them again hastily on feeling the sticky heat, glad of the cool blast from the air-conditioning vents. São Paulo was far less humid than this, Luiz had said; she could be glad of that at least.

A knock at the door heralded the arrival of a waiter with a table trolley containing far more than the items she had requested. Luiz followed the man in, despatching him with what appeared to be a whole handful of banknotes. It was unlikely to be payment on the spot in a place like this, Karen concluded, so it had to be a tip. Generous or not, she had no way of knowing.

He was wearing the suit from last night, this time with a black shirt. Opened a little lower at the neckline than the night before, it revealed a fine gold chain bearing a small medal, the latter nestling amidst a curly mat of hair.

'I only asked for fruit and coffee,' she said, pulse rate increasing by the minute. She indicated the cereal, the covered tureen containing who knew what, the rolls and preserves. 'I can't eat all that!'

From the look in the dark eyes, her instinctive move to tighten the tie belt of the robe had not gone unnoted, though he made no comment. 'It's of no consequence,' he declared. 'The choice is there should you change your mind. I'll take coffee with you.'

Feeling distinctly vulnerable, she poured for them both, leaving his black as he'd requested the previous night. Luiz accepted the cup from her to set it down on the small table at the side of a nearby chair.

'I reserved seats on the one-thirty shuttle to São Paulo,' he announced without preamble. 'You were right last night. Attempting to recreate our beginnings is a waste of time and effort. All we can do is return to Guavada and hope for an eventual cure.'

Karen took a couple of deep swallows from her own cup before answering, needing the stimulant. 'What do we tell your sister?'

'She already knows about the amnesia. I spoke to her earlier. She sends her love, and hopes to help in your recovery.'

'And the others?'

'Regina is to pass on the news. If you're concerned for what Beatriz might say, you can rest assured of her silence,' he added hardily.

'You think she won't even have told your brother the real reason I went?'

He hesitated. 'Perhaps that would be asking a little too much. There should be no secrets between husband and wife.'

Karen busied herself slicing a banana into a dish, adding grapes and ready-cut pieces of melon. 'As manager of the ranch, I suppose you hold a lot of authority,' she murmured.

'I don't manage the ranch,' he said. 'I own it.'

Her head came up. 'You *own* it?'

'Why such surprise?' he asked on an ironical note. 'Do I appear a man of small means?'

'No,' she acknowledged. 'Not at all. I just thought...' She broke off, lifting her shoulders. 'I'm not sure what I thought. Is your brother a partner?'

'No.' The statement was unequivocal. 'Are you going to eat the fruit, or simply continue poking at it?'

Karen forked up a piece of banana and put it in her mouth, chewing on it resolutely. Fruit here had a far better taste than back home, she had to admit. Except that England was home no longer, of course. Not for her. She might never even see it again!

'Is it far to the airport?' she asked, shutting out the hovering despondency.

'The São Paulo shuttle flies from Aeroporto Santos Dumont in the city centre,' Luiz returned. The flight itself takes less than an hour, the drive to Guavada considerably longer, but we should be there before dark.'

To meet more people she couldn't remember. People who had known *her* a whole three months. How, Karen wondered numbly, was she to deal with it all?

CHAPTER THREE

THE flight was short and uneventful. Luiz had left a Land Rover at the São Paulo airport on his way out, prompting Karen to wonder how she and this Lucio had got there themselves. If in a car, it must still be parked here somewhere.

She didn't care to broach the subject. Any mention of Lucio Fernandes was like waving a red rag before a bull.

By four o'clock they had left the city suburbs well behind and were driving through a landscape of grassy, tree-dotted plains broken by isolated low ranges. As Luiz had promised, the climate up here, some two thousand feet above sea level, was far pleasanter than Rio's.

Karen recognised nothing. Not that she'd expected to. The closer they came to the home she had abandoned just a few days ago, the worse she felt. Beatriz may be the only one to know the real reason she had flown, but the others were hardly going to see a supposed disagreement with Luiz as an adequate reason. There was every chance that her partial amnesia would be suspect to them, if not to Luiz himself. It was, she had to acknowledge, a very convenient method of avoiding responsibility for her actions.

'Are you feeling unwell?' Luiz asked, shooting her a glance. 'Do you wish to stop?'

Karen shook her head, pulling herself together. 'Just nervousness. How are they likely to react?'

He gave a faint smile. 'If I know my sister, she will throw her arms about you and commiserate. She blames me for driving you away with my domineering manner.'

'Are you?' Karen ventured. 'Domineering, I mean?'

'No more than I have to be to maintain your respect. We come from different cultures. There were adjustments to be made by each of us. I believed we had achieved a balance.'

'When I ruined everything by going off with another man,' Karen said hollowly. 'I still can't imagine how I could have done that. To leave...'

'To leave?' Luiz prompted as she let the words trail away.

Like the night before, she'd been about to say, To leave a man like you, but it still sounded too much like sycophancy. 'Without even a word,' she substituted. 'The whole thing was shameful!'

It was a moment before Luiz responded, his expression austere again. 'We must put it behind us.'

'*Can* you, though?' she asked.

'As I've said before, I have no choice.'

There was little comfort in the answer. Karen hadn't really expected any. It was still difficult to accept that the person she had been—the person she still felt herself to be inside—could have behaved in the manner ascribed to her. As if someone else had taken over her body during the lost months.

'Tell me about the ranch,' she said after a moment or two, desperate for something to break the silence between them.

Eyes on the road, Luiz lifted his shoulders in a brief shrug. 'What can I tell you? Guavada produces beef for the export markets. It was founded in my grandfather's day, the land area increased over the years to become what it is today.'

'You own a third share then?'

'As the eldest son, I inherited outright ownership.' His lips slanted when she failed to comment. 'I sense disapproval.'

Karen stole a swift glance at the hard-cut profile. 'It seems a bit unfair, that's all. In England all the children would be entitled to a share—male *and* female.'

'This is not England,' came the short response. 'Raymundo is no pauper. He could found businesses of his own. As to Regina, she bears the name only until she marries.'

'Is that imminent?'

'Regina has yet to meet someone capable of retaining her interest for longer than a few weeks.'

'Well, at eighteen she has plenty of time. After all...'

'After all, *I* waited long enough to find the right person,' he finished for her on a sardonic note as she broke off.

'What you obviously believed was the right person at the time,' she said, gathering her resources once more. 'We can all make mistakes.'

'Especially when judgement is clouded by a lovely face and body.'

'I doubt that you'd have allowed your libido to rule you to such an extent.' Karen kept her tone level with an effort. 'Any more than I would myself.'

Luiz made no reply. He looked remote again. Karen leaned back against the seat rest and closed her eyes, willing herself to stay in control. Whatever happened from here-on-in, she could only go along with it.

They drove through a sizeable township bright with greenery, turning off the road on to a narrower one some fifteen minutes later, to pass beneath a tall wooden archway with the name carved into its surface.

Fencing stretched to either hand as far as the eye could see, though with no sign of either cattle or habitation. The latter proved to be hidden behind a large clump of trees a half mile or so ahead.

Anticipating something akin to the ranch houses seen in cowboy films, Karen was totally thrown by the lovely colonial-style building that came into view. Fronted by beautifully landscaped lawns, its white walls glinting in the late afternoon sunlight, it had verandas running the whole way round.

The girl who came out from the house as the car drew to a standstill was an Andrade through and through, her waist-length hair darkly luxuriant about her vibrant young face, her figure, clad casually in shorts and sleeveless top, lithe and lovely. As Luiz had predicted, she gave no quarter to the amnesia, descending the steps with open arms and a radiant smile.

'So wonderful to have you home with us again!' she declared. 'But your poor face! How it must pain you!'

'Not any more,' Karen assured her. 'And the marks will soon be gone too.' She found a smile of her own, overcoming the awkwardness of the moment by sheer willpower. 'Perhaps my memory will have returned by then.'

The shadow that passed across her sister-in-law's face was come and gone in an instant. 'It will! I'm sure of it!'

‘I think refreshment would be a priority at present,’ said Luiz with a questioning look at Karen. ‘A cold drink, perhaps?’

She hesitated. ‘I don’t suppose tea would be available?’

‘Of course.’ His tone was tinged with humour for a moment. ‘You insisted on it. Too much coffee, you said, was bad for the health.’

Mood lifting a little, she tried a lighter tone herself. ‘Not very tactful in a coffee-producing country!’

‘I like tea too,’ claimed Regina. ‘I’ll have some prepared immediately.’ She held out an inviting hand. ‘Come.’

Karen accompanied her indoors to a wide hall. A wrought-iron staircase rose from the centre to branch off left and right to open galleries. Plant-life abounded, spilling from standing pots, from hanging baskets, from the galleries themselves.

The woman who appeared in an archway under the curve of the staircase was in her mid-twenties. Unlike Regina’s, her hair was a dark blonde; her striking features were formed from a totally different mould, her figure voluptuous. There was no welcome in the tawny eyes, just a cold watchfulness.

She spoke in Portuguese, drawing a sharp admonishment from Luiz.

‘We will all of us speak only English when Karen is present. The way we did when she first came to Guavada.’

‘Does that mean I learned to speak Portuguese myself?’ Karen asked, picking up on the nuances.

‘You acquired a fair grasp,’ he confirmed.

She found that difficult to take in. She’d shown little aptitude for compulsory French in school, much less other languages.

On the other hand, she’d never lived in a foreign speaking household before.

‘You expect us all to believe this claim of yours?’ demanded the newcomer, who could only be Beatriz.

‘What you believe is your affair,’ Luiz cut in hardily before Karen could form an answer. ‘What you say in this house is mine. Where is Raymundo?’

‘He had to go out.’ Beatriz both looked and sounded resentful of the warning, but obviously wasn’t prepared to make an issue of it. ‘Some problem.’

‘Then we’ll see him at dinner. Have the tea sent up,’ he added to his sister.

He took Karen’s arm to guide her up the iron-balustraded staircase, creating havoc with her hard-won equilibrium. She was torn between two opposing fires when he released her at the top of the stairs, a part of her relieved to be free of his touch, another, deeper, part yearning for even closer contact.

The room to which he led the way lay towards the end of the open gallery. It was large and airy, the carved dark wood furnishings relieved by white walls and lush fabrics. The panelled windows were shuttered in slatted wood.

The wide bed drew Karen’s eyes. It would, she reckoned, sleep four with ease. She had shared that bed with the man at her side—made love with him in the dark of night. The thought alone made her quiver.

‘Your bathroom lies through there,’ said Luiz, indicating a door in the far wall. ‘The other door gives access to my room.’ He registered her expression with an ironic slant of his lips. ‘A matter of tradition still sometimes upheld in our culture—although we made little use of it.’

He was standing close. Karen had a sudden mad urge to turn and put her arms about his neck, her lips to his; to seek a way back to what she had lost. Only the fear of rejection kept her from giving way. It would take time, he'd admitted, to put the images of her in another man's arms aside. She could hardly blame him for that.

Her suitcase was brought by a young man dressed in dark trousers and white shirt, whom Karen could only assume was a servant. He gave her a curious glance, but said nothing, depositing the suitcase on a stand at the foot of the bed and departing. No doubt, she reflected wryly, to speculate with others on the return of the errant wife.

Luiz had moved to a window, standing with hands thrust into trouser pockets, gazing out on to landscaped grounds lush with foliage.

'We must find a way,' he said. 'There can be no going back, only forward.'

'I know.' Karen's voice was husky, her throat tight. 'It isn't going to be easy for either of us.'

He swung to look at her, lips twisting as he took in the pallor of her face, the shadows beneath her eyes. 'You dread the thought of renewing our relationship?'

'I dread the thought of living with this blankness for the rest of my life,' she prevaricated.

'It may not come to that. The doctor told me you could recover your memory at any moment.'

He would also have told him that the longer the amnesia went on the less likely it was to end, Karen suspected. She gazed at him in silence, willing him to take the first step towards the renewal he had spoken of. He still wanted her; she could sense that much in him. It could be a way back. It might be the *only* way back.

The arrival of the tea, borne this time by a young woman, put paid to any move he might have made.

'I'll leave you to refresh yourself in peace,' he said. 'Dinner is at nine. I'd suggest you take advantage of the time to rest. You look exhausted.'

She felt it. Both emotionally and physically. Lonely too, when he'd gone. She had been mistress of this household for a whole three months. A role she would be expected to take on again if the marriage was to continue in any sense at all. The very idea was daunting.

Drained though she was, sleep was farthest from her mind at present. She drank the tea gratefully, then took a look in the bathroom, finding it equipped with every luxury.

The cabinet above the ornate vanity unit held an array of expensive feminine toiletries, the brand name the same as the ones she had found in her suitcase back at the hospital. She closed the door again, faced by her reflection in the mirror fronting it. The grazes were already beginning to heal, the bruise at her temple to lighten a little in hue. In another few days—a week at the most—there would be no outward sign of the accident left, her looks fully restored. For what that was worth.

Back in the bedroom, she tentatively tried the connecting door, finding it locked. According to Luiz, he'd spent little time in there, but he would almost certainly be doing it tonight. For how many other nights remained to be seen. Whatever else had been lost, the physical attraction between them was still strong. It was all she had to cling to.

A walk-in closet held a variety of garments. She fingered through them, looking for something—*anything*—recognisable. There was nothing. She could only think she must have acquired a whole new wardrobe for her trip to Rio.

The surface of the highly polished dark wood dressing table was bare. Tucked away in a drawer, she at last found some familiar items: the silver-backed hair brushes her parents had given her on her eighteenth

birthday; two ballet dancer figurines; the antique silver box she used to hold tissues. None of them worth a great deal in monetary terms, but sentimentally irreplaceable.

There must be other things somewhere—these, and the photograph of her parents, couldn't be all she had asked Julie to send—but they sufficed to give her some feeling of home.

Someone must have been in here and cleared them away, she reflected. Hardly the kind of thing the servants would take it on themselves to do, and she doubted if either Regina or Raymundo was the culprit. Which left only Beatriz.

The woman's animus had been only too apparent. Considering what she knew, it was hardly unexpected. Hardly so surprising either that she might suspect her of fabricating the amnesia in order to protect herself from Luiz's anger.

Weariness finally overcame her. With almost three hours to go until dinner, there was plenty of time to take the sleep Luiz had advised. She was going to need all the stamina she could muster to get through the evening.

The room was lamplit when she opened her eyes, the shutters closed on the outside world. She hadn't undressed before lying down on the bed, but someone had still seen fit to cover her with a light throw. Luiz? she wondered.

It was just gone eight, she saw from the clock on the bedside table. Her head felt heavy when she sat up, her eyes filled with grains of sand. She had to force herself to her feet.

A shower went some way towards refreshing her, although she'd left herself with no time to wash and dry her hair as she would have liked to do. She used a tortoiseshell clip she found in a drawer to pin it back into her nape.

Going by the style of clothing she had found, dress here was more casual than formal. She donned a swirly skirt in mingled colours, along with a white top scooped low at the neckline, viewing her image with a spark of interest. A very different look from her normal, or what had been normal, style, but she had to admit it suited her.

With no further excuse to linger, and with the time approaching the set hour, she nerved herself to leave the room. The man standing in the wide hall below looked up as she paused at the gallery rail, the expression that crossed his face at the sight of her too swiftly come and gone for analysis.

The resemblance between him and Luiz was too marked for him to be anyone other than the brother. Karen drew a steadying breath.

'You must be Raymundo.'

Dark head tipped back, he viewed her for a long moment in silence. 'So it's true,' he said at length. 'You have no memory of me.'

'Not of anyone,' she confirmed. 'I'm...sorry.'

'A dreadful thing to happen.' He sounded genuinely sympathetic. 'Are you coming down?'

Cheered a little by the lack of censure—assuming his wife had told him about Lucio Fernandes—she moved to the staircase and descended to join him. He was shorter than Luiz by an inch or two, she judged, though no less fit.

He said something in Portuguese, shaking his head as if in recollection. 'It's good to have you back,' he amended softly. 'Soon you'll be speaking our language again.'

'I can't imagine it right now, but I'll do my best,' she returned, sparking a sudden smile.

'We'll all of us do that.' He extended an arm. 'You will allow me to guide you?'

He meant to the dining room, of course. She had, Karen acknowledged, not the slightest idea which of the doors leading off the hall it might lay behind.

‘Thanks,’ she said gratefully.

They found the rest of the family already seated in a room which, though well appointed, was very much smaller than she would have anticipated in a house of this size and stature. The table itself was round, and would seat no more than six.

‘This is where we eat as a family,’ Raymundo explained, as if sensing her confusion. ‘The dining room is only used for more formal entertaining.’ His eyes were on his brother, who had risen from his place. ‘Karen was lost. She needed to be shown the way.’

Face unrevealing, Luiz moved to pull out the chair at his side in mute invitation. Karen slid into it, feeling anything but comfortable, aware of Beatriz’s eyes on her from across the table. She didn’t need to look to know what they held. The enmity was searing.

Raymundo took his own seat between the two of them, with Regina closing the circle.

‘You look so much less tired than when you arrived,’ exclaimed the latter warmly. ‘The rest has been good for you.’

‘You slept deeply,’ said Luiz. ‘You failed to stir even when I closed the window shutters.’

‘It’s been a long day.’ Karen made the comment as light as possible. It was going to seem an even longer night, she judged, but it had to be endured. It all had to be endured. Beatriz wasn’t going to make life easy for her for certain.

Hungry by now, she ate her fill of the delicious seafood stew that constituted the main part of the meal. *Moqueca*, Regina told her it was called. She refused both the coffee that ended the ritual and the tea that was offered, finishing off her wine instead. She longed to retire to the privacy of her bedroom again, yet at the same time dreaded the thought of the lonely hours to come.

Luiz had said little at all during the meal. Karen could see his hand on the periphery of her vision as he lifted the coffee cup to his lips. Her husband: the man she had married with what appeared to be scarcely a moment’s real thought about what she was doing. Even while she could appreciate how bowled over she would have been by him on sight alone, it had been an utterly mad impulse to follow. She hadn’t known him any better then than she knew him now. Not in any proper sense.

Julie must have thought she was utterly crazy. *She* certainly would have if the positions had been reversed. Except that Julie would never have got herself into such a situation. Her feet were far too firmly on the ground.

If she’d stayed in touch with her it was possible that she’d told her what was going on. The only way to find out was to put Julie in the picture regarding her memory loss and ask, although she shrank from the thought.

‘Your head hurts?’ Luiz asked, bringing her to the sudden realisation that she had a hand to her temple.

‘It aches a little,’ she admitted truthfully.

‘Then you must rest again.’ He got to his feet, coming behind her to draw back her chair. ‘Sleep is the best healer.’

For the body, perhaps, she thought. It made little difference to her mental state.

‘I’ll say goodnight then,’ she proffered to the table at large, avoiding any direct contact with Beatriz’s gaze.

‘Tomorrow,’ said Regina purposefully, ‘we will renew your acquaintance with La Santa.’

‘The town we passed through,’ Luiz supplied.

‘It’s market day tomorrow,’ Regina continued. ‘You like the market.’

Karen could imagine. She always had liked them. She smiled at the girl. ‘I’ll look forward to it.’

Expecting to be left to find her own way back to her room, she was disconcerted when Luiz accompanied her.

‘You don’t need to do this,’ she said in the outer hall. ‘I’ll be quite all right.’

‘You look far from all right,’ he returned shortly. ‘I’m in need of rest myself, so you’ve nothing to fear from me tonight.’

‘I don’t fear you,’ she denied. ‘I just...’ She spread her hands in a helpless little gesture. ‘It’s so hard to know *what* to say!’

‘Then say nothing,’ he advised. ‘Only time will tell whether our marriage can be made good again. But be assured, good or not, it will continue.’

There was nothing she *could* say to that, Karen acknowledged painfully.

CHAPTER FOUR

AWAKE at seven-thirty, Karen was downstairs by eight, to find Luiz and Raymundo had already breakfasted and gone about whatever business they had. What time they might return was apparently anyone's guess.

The meal was served out on the veranda at the rear of the house. Eating the fruit that was all she had appetite for, Karen felt pinioned beneath Beatriz's steely gaze. She was grateful for Regina's efforts to lighten the atmosphere.

The day was already warm, with a promise of higher temperatures to come. It would have been October when she had first arrived: a brand new bride, too head-over-heels in love with the man she'd known bare days to view her new world through anything but the most rose-tinted of glasses.

How long, she wondered, had it taken for reality to kick in? How long before she'd begun to regret abandoning everything and everyone she knew to settle in a country totally alien to her? Life here was so different from what she'd been accustomed to. Had she ever really adjusted to it?

'You mentioned reintroducing me to La Santa today,' she said to Regina, doing her best to ignore Beatriz's heavy presence. 'Do you still feel like it?'

'Of course.' The girl hesitated a moment. 'You realise word of your amnesia will already have spread.'

'It would be a difficult secret to keep,' Karen agreed, trying to be practical about it. 'At least I shan't be expected to recognise people on sight.'

Silent up until now, Beatriz said something short and sharp beneath her breath, then rose abruptly to her feet to stalk indoors. Karen caught Regina's eye and gave a helpless little shrug.

'Pay no attention,' the younger girl advised. 'She was always jealous of you. You took the position she would have occupied herself had Luiz been willing. Raymundo is my brother too, and I love him dearly, but he can never be more than second best in Beatriz's eyes.'

Taken aback, Karen sought a response. 'That's a big assumption to make.'

'I make no assumption.' Regina's tone was emphatic. 'She has no real love for him. She even refuses to give him a child!'

'You can't possibly know that,' Karen felt bound to protest.

'Then why has she not fallen pregnant in three years of marriage? Raymundo yearns for children!'

Luiz must want them too, came the thought. Or a son at least. Yet she hadn't fallen pregnant either. A failure on her part, or on his?

'It sometimes happens that way,' she said, blanking out the question. 'Three years isn't all that long.'

'It is for the Andrades. You had only been married to Luiz for four weeks when you discovered your pregnancy.' The dark eyes widened in sudden dismay at the shock expressed in the green ones opposite. 'Luiz did not tell you?'

'No.' Karen's voice seemed to be coming from a long distance away, almost drowned by the drumming in her ears. 'What happened?'

‘You miscarried.’ Regina was distressed, obviously at a loss as to how to proceed. ‘I’m so sorry! I thought...I believed...’

It took Karen everything she had to keep herself from crumbling. A baby! She’d been going to have a baby! How could she not have known that?

‘I suppose Luiz thought I had enough to deal with at present,’ she got out. ‘How...far gone was I?’

‘Almost two months.’ The distress was growing by the moment. ‘He will be furious with me for telling you. How can I have been so dense?’

‘I had to know some time.’ Fighting to stay on top of her chaotic emotions, Karen drew a deep breath. ‘Do you know what caused me to miscarry?’

‘The doctors could find no organic reason for it. And they said there was no cause to fear it might happen again.’ Regina was eager to repair at least some of the harm she had done. ‘You will have many healthy babies, I’m sure of it!’

She broke off once more in recollection of the present circumstances, pulling a rueful face. ‘I speak before I think again. Can you ever forgive me?’

Karen forced a smile. ‘There’s nothing to forgive.’ Her hesitation was brief, the need to know outweighing the reluctance to ask. ‘Did Luiz blame me for it?’

‘Blame you?’ Regina sounded shocked. ‘Of course not! He was devastated, of course, but his concern was mostly for you. He loves you so much, Karen. You must believe that!’

‘He told me we had disagreements.’

It was Regina’s turn to hesitate. ‘Well, yes. He can be a little imperious at times. But there was never any serious disunity, until—’

‘Until I suddenly upped and went,’ Karen finished for her.

The younger girl nodded. ‘It was a shock to all of us, but to Luiz most of all. Whatever he’d said or done to make you do such a thing, he was utterly distraught. It was fortunate that he returned early to the house. You had been gone no longer than an hour or two when he set out after you.’

Karen’s brows were drawn together in an effort to break through the barriers. ‘How could he know where I was heading?’ she asked, only just stopping herself from saying we.

‘You had taken your passport, as if your intention was to return to England, but if so you could have gone there direct from São Paulo. I believe you went to Rio because he had made you unhappy, and you just wished to teach him a lesson.’

As a mere gesture, it would have been a little over the top, Karen reflected. Better that Regina retained the notion, though, than know the truth. Whether Lucio Fernandes would have told anyone else about the affair there was no way of knowing, although fear that Luiz would find out should surely have been enough to keep his mouth closed.

She still found the affair itself so difficult to accept. The way she felt about marital infidelity now was the way she’d always felt—the way her parents had felt. She’d read somewhere that losing a baby could affect a woman in more ways than just the physical. Was it possible that her loss had triggered a whole change of character?

‘The car you took was fetched back from the airport yesterday,’ Regina continued, intent on filling in the pieces for her.

Distracted, Karen said blankly, ‘I can drive?’

‘Of course. How else could you have got there? Luiz taught you himself. It meant we no longer had to call on Carlos. I hold a licence too now, but I’m happy to direct you.’

Karen shook her head, mind whirling. ‘If I can’t remember being able to drive, I can hardly just set off. I wouldn’t even know *how* to change gear, much less when!’

‘The car you drive is an automatic,’ Regina answered, ‘but I understand your reluctance. Perhaps it will come back to you quickly when you do try.’

Karen couldn’t imagine it. If she knew what time Luiz might be back she would stay and face him with what she had just learned, but sitting around waiting for him to put in an appearance would only serve to increase the anger boiling up inside her. He should have told her about the baby! How could he *not* have told her? What else was he keeping from her?

‘What should I wear?’ she asked, desperate to stop herself from dwelling on it all. ‘To go to town, I mean.’

‘We dress very casually on most occasions,’ Regina advised. ‘Especially in the summer. You must wear what you find the most comfortable.’ She gave a sigh. ‘It’s difficult to remember how little you know of our ways. You became so much a part of us.’

‘I was never homesick?’

‘Perhaps a little at times, but Luiz could soon bring a smile back to your lips. You told me once that he was the only man you had ever loved.’ She glanced at the watch encircling her wrist. ‘We should go while the morning is still young.’

Karen went up to her room and changed the dress she’d slipped on for a pair of light cotton trousers and a shirt, similar to what Regina herself was wearing. The wad of notes was still in the wallet. She still had no idea of the value, but there would surely be ample should she fancy buying anything. Not that shopping was of any interest right now.

Only on opening another section did she find the platinum credit card bearing her name. She must have been relying on that as a means of obtaining more money, she thought painfully. It was more than likely that Lucio Fernandes had been relying on it too, hence the disappearing act when she was knocked down. The last thing he would have wanted was to be around when Luiz came on the scene.

The whole concept was intolerable. What spell had the man cast on her?

Fairly minor though it was, the town offered a variety of shops, restaurants and places of entertainment. Bathed in a glow of gilt, the church was a baroque magnificence. The market was held in a tree-shaded square, a collection of gaily coloured awnings covering stalls selling everything and anything.

Wandering through them at Regina’s side, Karen was aware of sideways glances and whispered comments from one or two of the vendors. She did her best to ignore them. Fretting about it wouldn’t help anything. She simply had to learn to live with it.

The woman Regina greeted by one of the stalls made a valiant effort to show no discomfiture. She was in her early thirties, face and figure comfortably rounded.

‘This is Dona Ferrez,’ said Regina. ‘She and her husband, Marques, are close family friends.’

‘I’m sorry to be like this,’ proffered Karen with a smile before the other could speak, determined to grasp the nettle firmly.

‘The fault is far from yours,’ Dona assured her in stilted English, looking a little more relaxed. ‘We were all of us desolated to hear of your accident. You must be finding matters very difficult.’

‘It certainly isn’t easy,’ Karen agreed. ‘I feel like a fish out of water!’

‘It would be best for you to meet with all the people who know you at the one time,’ the other suggested. ‘I will arrange a barbecue for this coming Sunday.’

Unable to see a way out of what threatened to be a pretty overwhelming experience, Karen could only smile and nod. ‘That’s very thoughtful of you. I’ll look forward to it.’

‘It won’t be so very bad,’ Regina comforted as they moved on. ‘The people who will be there will be only too anxious to put you at your ease. You are regarded very highly by all our friends.’

‘I’ve met them often?’

‘On many occasions. We socialise a great deal. Unlike Rio, it can become quite cold at times here in winter. Our entertainment then takes place indoors.’

Karen had always believed Brazil to be hot everywhere all year round but, covering such a vast area, she supposed there had to be variations in climate. She preferred the idea of some seasonal change in temperature. It made it seem more like home.

Home. The wave of nostalgia that swept her was grievous. Would she ever see England again?

The desire to confront Luiz had subsided to some extent by the time they returned to the house. The sight of him lounging on the veranda, seemingly without a care in the world, brought it all surging back.

Wearing dark jeans and T-shirt, his feet clad in leather boots, he looked very different from the man who had brought her here yesterday. His working gear, she guessed, although someone in his position would hardly be called on to perform any manual labour.

‘How long have you been waiting?’ asked Regina a little tentatively.

‘Perhaps an hour,’ he said. His eyes were on Karen, appraising the spots of colour burning high on her cheekbones. ‘You enjoyed the market?’

‘I didn’t recall anything, if that’s what you really want to know,’ she answered shortly.

Her tone brought a sudden narrowing of the dark eyes. ‘You sound hostile,’ he observed. ‘Is there something you have to say to me?’

‘It’s my fault.’ Regina looked as though she would prefer to be anywhere but where she was at this moment. ‘I thought Karen knew about the baby.’

‘Which I would have, if you’d had the decency to tell me about it yourself!’ Karen cut in. ‘Don’t blame Regina for taking it for granted you would have done!’

‘Regina should have had the sense to realise how far from ready you were for such a disclosure,’ he returned, directing an angry glance at his sister. ‘You have enough to contend with.’

‘I’m the best judge of what I can or can’t deal with,’ Karen flashed, and saw his lips slant.

‘How would you know whether or not you’re able to deal with matters in advance of the information being imparted? I made the judgement I thought best for you.’

‘Then stop it!’ She was trembling, but too fired up to withdraw. ‘If I’m to have any hope at all of regaining my memory I need to know everything there is to know about these past months. So anything else you’re holding back I’d—’

‘There’s nothing more.’ The interruption was terse. ‘If there was, we would not be discussing it here and now. I think it might be best if you took some time to calm yourself before we discuss anything at all.’ He held up a staying hand as she started to speak. ‘I said that’s enough!’

Karen subsided with reluctance, not quite up to meeting the challenge. Regina had said he could be imperious; she had certainly been right!

Maddening though she found it now, and would almost certainly have found it then, she doubted all the same if it would have been enough on its own to send her careering into another man's arms. There *had* to be something more! Something he still wasn't telling her.

A flicker of movement from the doorway drew her eyes. Whoever had been standing there had gone, but she had a strong feeling that it had been Beatriz. If what Regina had told her was to be taken seriously, the woman's dislike of her was easier to understand, if not appreciate. She felt sorry for Raymundo.

'I think I might go and lie down for an hour,' she said, suddenly weary of it all.

Luiz inclined his head, his expression giving little away. 'By all means.'

'You will come down for lunch?' asked Regina. 'We eat at two.'

It was only just twelve. 'I'll be there,' Karen confirmed, more to please her sister-in-law than through any desire for food.

She made her escape before anything else could be said. Gaining the bedroom, she stood for a moment or two trying to gather herself. The weariness was more mental than physical. She felt totally drained.

There was little comfort to be gained by lying down. Sleep had never seemed further away. She put her hands to her smooth abdomen, still finding it difficult to believe that she'd carried a child for two months. Had it been a boy or a girl? Had she miscarried here, or in hospital? The questions kept piling up, whirling like dervishes around her brain. There was so much she needed to know.

The gentle knock on the door came as some relief. Regina might be in the dark regarding the reason she had left Guavada, but she could provide at least one or two more answers.

Except that it wasn't Regina who came into the room at her invitation, but Luiz himself, tautening her throat afresh.

'I came to apologise,' he said unexpectedly. 'I should have warned Regina to keep her own counsel on the matter until you were better able to withstand the shock. The blame is mine, not hers. I can only hope you suffer no lasting harm from learning the news so precipitately.'

Propped on an elbow, Karen regarded the firmly controlled features with eyes suddenly opened to the realisation that she wasn't the only one who'd undergone the loss. His loss, in fact, was twofold: not just his child, but his wife too.

'It can't have been easy for you either at the time,' she said softly.

The dark head inclined. 'No, it was not—though the assurance that there was no reason to fear it happening again was some consolation.'

'Did we try for another baby?' Karen ventured.

'No. I believed it best to take a little time to ourselves first. If I'd realised...' He broke off, jaw tensing. 'What can't be altered must be endured.'

'If you believe I began this affair with Lucio Fernandes some way back, it seems odd that Beatriz was the only one to suspect anything,' Karen got out with difficulty.

'The two of you were obviously very circumspect in your meetings. Beatriz herself became suspicious only a matter of days before you left.'

'I'd have thought she would have tried to warn you.'

The shrug was dismissive. 'If she had, I might have thought she was simply attempting to cause trouble between us. She never approved of the marriage.'

Considering what Regina had told her earlier, Karen could understand that. What she still couldn't understand was how on earth she and this Lucio had managed to keep the affair so secret. If it weren't for the fact that Luiz had verified the names on the passenger list to Rio that day, she might even suspect Beatriz of making the whole thing up in order to discredit her in his eyes.

'I'm sorry,' she proffered miserably. 'I know I keep saying that, but it's all I *can* say. I hate to think of what I've done to you—to our marriage. I only wish I could somehow put things right again.'

Dark eyes travelled the length of her body, revealing a hunger that stirred her to the depths. When he moved it was with purpose, coming across to sit down on the edge of the bed and draw her up into his arms.

Karen met the kiss hesitantly at first, not at all sure if this was what she wanted right now: a hesitancy dispersed in seconds by the emotions sweeping through her. Her arms lifted of their own accord to slide about his neck, her fingers tangling in the crisp thickness. Her breasts were pressed against the hardness of his chest, springing the nipples to vibrant life, her nostrils filled with the male scent of him. There was a dampness between her thighs, an aching need she could barely sustain. If her mind failed to recall what fulfilment felt like, her body had no such problem.

Without removing his lips from hers, Luiz reached between them to unbutton her shirt, sliding his hand inside to seek the firm curve of her breast. Karen caught her breath as his fingers enclosed the sensitive, tingling tip, moaning deep in her throat at a sensation so close to pain yet so infinitely pleasurable.

She was bereft when he withdrew the hand and put her from him to rise abruptly to his feet again.

'I'll show you round the ranch after lunch,' he said without looking at her. 'I have other matters to attend to for now.'

Karen eased herself to a sitting position as the door closed behind him, reaching with numbed fingers to fasten the buttons he had opened. She had wanted him to make love to her so badly, but the spectre of Lucio Fernandes still loomed too large. Perhaps there would come a time when he was able to put the images that haunted him from his mind. If they were to make anything at all of this marriage of theirs, he would have to. They would both have to.

Beatriz was missing from the lunch table. She had gone to visit a friend, Raymundo advised. Karen could only be grateful for the woman's absence. There were questions only Beatriz could answer for her, but she was reluctant to ask them for fear of what she might hear.

Whatever Luiz had been feeling earlier, he appeared to have recovered from it. Conversation was light throughout the meal. Regina greeted the news that he was to take Karen on a tour of the ranch with pleasure, obviously reassured that things were working out between them.

They went by Jeep, to Karen's relief. She had never, to the best of her knowledge, ridden a horse in her life. The corrals she had originally expected to see lay some half a mile from the house, backed by barns and other outbuildings. There were several ranch hands around employed on various jobs. Luiz stopped to speak with one of them who appeared to be in charge, leaving Karen to fidget beneath the covert glances cast by those in the vicinity.

If Lucio Fernandes had lived and worked with these men it seemed unlikely that none of them had known of his affair with the wife of their employer, yet it seemed equally unlikely that if any of them *had* known they would have kept totally quiet about it. Her memory loss would be the reason for the glances. There probably wasn't a solitary soul within a hundred mile radius who hadn't heard about *that*!

'I'm beginning to feel a regular freak,' she commented wryly when they were on their way again. 'It was the same in town this morning. Everyone staring and whispering!'

‘It will soon be forgotten,’ Luiz answered, giving way to a smile at the realisation of what he’d just said. ‘An unfortunate turn of phrase in the circumstances.’

Karen smiled too, heartened by the humour. ‘But hopefully true.’ She paused, looking for some non-contentious subject. ‘We met someone called Dona Ferrez in town this morning. She offered to arrange a barbecue on Sunday in order for me to get all the meetings over with at the one time.’

‘Thoughtful of her.’ Luiz directed a glance. ‘How do you feel about it?’

‘Nervous,’ she admitted. ‘But there’s no point crying off. At least none of them...’

‘None of them will know why you were in Rio to begin with,’ Luiz supplied levelly as she let the words peter out. ‘A question I may be called on to answer myself.’

‘You could say I was shopping,’ she suggested after a moment, and saw his lips twist.

‘There’s nothing you could buy in Rio that couldn’t be obtained in São Paulo city, but then, there’s no accounting for a woman’s whim.’

He brought the Jeep to a halt as a party of riders appeared round a bend in the trail. The leader approached the vehicle without dismounting, his attitude respectful. A good-looking man in his thirties, lithe and fit in his working gear of denims and shirt, much like those Luiz himself had been wearing earlier.

Karen kept her eyes front as the two men conversed. If this man was the ranch foreman, as seemed likely, he had been the one to employ Lucio Fernandes. Obviously, Luiz accorded him no blame. But then why should he? The man could hardly have foretold what was to happen.

‘I think I’d like to go back now,’ she said dully when the men departed. ‘I have a headache coming on.’

It was no out and out lie, though Luiz’s immediate solicitude made her feel guilty of deception.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I should have realised that the Jeep would prove too jolting a ride for you.’

The Jeep had nothing to do with what was ailing her, but it sufficed as an excuse. Karen closed her eyes as he turned back along the track, hoping he would take the hint and not attempt to talk. She felt so utterly debased.

Luiz despatched her to rest again when they reached the house. She went without protest, needing some time alone to try pulling herself together.

The dull ache behind her eyes was no aid to clear thinking. Not that clarity of thought had any bearing when it came to pondering the imponderable. While her mind refused to release the memory of these past months she had to accept the situation as it appeared, regardless of how much she deplored it.

She was sitting at the window watching the sun slowly sink beneath the horizon when a knock came at the door. Expecting Luiz, she was surprised to see Beatriz enter the room in answer to her invitation.

The older woman closed the door and stood with her back to it, gazing hard-faced across the distance between them.

‘What do you hope to gain by this act?’ she demanded harshly.

‘It’s no act.’ Karen was hard put to keep her voice from revealing her inner turbulence. ‘I don’t remember anything that happened these past months. Why should you doubt it?’

‘Because I know how devious you are,’ came the taut reply. ‘If you hope...’

She broke off, biting her lip as if about to say something she hadn’t planned on saying. ‘Luiz was a fool for ever marrying you!’ she spat.

‘It was probably a foolish move on both our parts.’ Karen drew a steadying breath, reluctant to ask the question yet unable to refrain from it too. ‘Luiz tells me you suspected I was...seeing Lucio Fernandes.’

The expression that flickered across the other face was difficult to define in the lowering light. When the answer came it was in a subtly altered tone. ‘Yes.’

‘So why didn’t you tell him?’

The pause was brief. ‘Because I had no proof and feared his reaction. I had no choice but to tell him when you left.’ Her tone hardened again. ‘He should have let you go! You were never worthy to hold the name of Andrade!’

‘So it seems.’ Karen made a valiant effort to hang on to some semblance of self-respect. ‘Unfortunately, Luiz doesn’t believe in divorce.’

‘But neither can he keep you here against your will.’

The light was almost gone. Karen reached out a hand to the table at her side and switched on the reading lamp, gazing across at her sister-in-law with drawn brows.

‘You’re suggesting I should leave again anyway?’

‘The only honourable course,’ came the answer. ‘How can Luiz be expected to feel anything but disgust for you after what you did? What kind of life are you condemning him to by staying?’

‘What kind of life would *I* have to look forward to if I did as you say?’ Karen asked, doing her best to stay in control of her emotions. ‘I’ve no home, no job. I’m not even sure I have enough, if any, money of my own left to get me back home to start with.’

‘I could help you there.’

The offer came too pat to be anything but premeditated. Swept by a disgust of her own, Karen got to her feet, better to face the woman.

‘For what purpose?’ she shot back. ‘Divorced or not, Luiz would never turn to you for solace.’ She shook her head emphatically as Beatriz made to speak. ‘This has gone far enough. I want you to leave. And in case there’s any doubt left in your mind, *I’ll* be staying.’

The striking features opposite were for a moment suffused with a fury that turned them almost ugly, tawny eyes glittering with hatred. When she moved it was abruptly, the door slamming in her wake.

Karen sank back into the seat she had vacated, the anger that had driven her to her feet overridden by shame that she had allowed herself to be goaded into retaliation.

Tomorrow was Saturday. The best time to catch Julie at home—once she’d discovered what the time difference between here and London was. Reluctant though she felt to put the question, she had to know what her friend might have been told. Only if she heard it from Julie’s lips could she really start to believe there had been an affair.

CHAPTER FIVE

TIME differences in Brazil apparently differed by region. São Paulo was only three hours behind GMT, Luiz advised at dinner when asked. If she rang around eleven in the morning, she'd catch Julie at breakfast, Karen calculated. In the meantime, there was another night to be got through.

Luiz made no move to accompany her when she took her leave barely an hour after they finished eating. He seemed distant. Hardly to be wondered at, Karen supposed. He was still having difficulty coming to terms with their altered circumstances. How long it might be before he managed to set the knowledge of her apparent betrayal aside was anyone's guess. It might be never. Only if she could prove that there was no truth in it did they stand a chance of restoring all they'd lost—and how did she do that when all *she* had to go on was instinct?

She was still awake when he came to bed himself; she heard the movement from the next room. She'd tried the connecting door earlier and found it now unlocked, but she doubted if he had been the one to do the unlocking. Regina, at a guess. Her young sister-in-law would probably try anything to get the two of them together again.

A part of her wanted desperately to get up and go to him, but the fear of rejection was stronger. It had to be up to him to make the first move. For now, all she could do was deal with the need churning her whole body as best she may.

Morning brought rain. A downpour that lasted more than an hour and stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Viewing the still heavy skies from the veranda after breakfast, Karen wondered if there was more to come.

'It will clear,' Luiz told her. 'In a little while the sun will break through and the land will begin to steam. At least here the humidity remains at a bearable level. Rio is like a sauna in the rain.'

'It was bad enough even without it,' Karen returned, recalling the impact when she'd emerged into the open for the first time back at the clinic. 'I can't imagine how anyone manages to work in that kind of heat!'

'The offices are air-conditioned, the ones who work outdoors are accustomed to it,' he said. 'Do you plan to telephone your friend today?'

'As soon as I think she'll be up and about.' Karen stole a glance at him, uncertain of his mood. 'You don't object?'

The bronzed features remained impassive. 'Why should I object? Perhaps she will be able to shed some light on your memory.'

Having given the possibility some thought overnight, Karen doubted that she would have told Julie she'd been having an affair, in the certain knowledge of what her friend's reaction would be. All she could hope for was that there might be something Julie *could* tell her that would fire a spark.

The rest of the family had dispersed, leaving the two of them alone. Beatriz had had little to say for herself this morning, though her attitude certainly hadn't altered. Karen dismissed the woman from her mind. Right now, she had more important concerns.

Seated in one of the lounging chairs, legs thrust out before him, Luiz looked relaxed on the surface, but she could sense the tension in him. He was dressed casually in lightweight trousers and cotton shirt.

‘Are you free all day today?’ she asked tentatively.

‘I’m free whenever I wish it,’ he answered. ‘My foremen need no supervision.’ His head turned her way, gaze sliding over her face to linger for a heart-thudding moment on the vulnerable curve of her mouth. ‘Your injuries are fading fast. Not that they could detract from your beauty even at their worst. I can blame no man for wanting you, but I’ll kill any other who attempts to take you from me—as I would Lucio Fernandas should I ever catch up with him.’

The tone was almost conversational. Only in the depths of the dark eyes did the ferocity show. Karen drew a shallow breath.

‘If I chose to have an affair with him, then the fault is just as much mine.’

‘You say *if*?’ Luiz’s tone had hardened. ‘For what other reason would the two of you have been travelling together? For what other reason would you have left at all?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said wretchedly. ‘According to what you told me back in the hospital, everything appeared normal with our marriage right up until the night before I left, but I’m sure it wouldn’t have been if I’d been...sleeping with another man.’

‘Meaning you would have been unable to respond to me physically?’ Luiz slanted a lip. ‘You give me little credit.’

Karen felt warmth rise under her skin beneath the sardonic gaze, a stirring deep in the pit of her stomach. Whatever the circumstances, he would have no difficulty at all in arousing her. He was doing it now without even trying, making her yearn for what she couldn’t even remember.

‘I meant in other ways,’ she got out. ‘There must have been *something*!’

The hesitation was brief. ‘You’ve seemed withdrawn at times these last weeks, I admit. I assumed the moodiness was due both to the loss you’d suffered and the normal female cycle, but perhaps I was simply deluding myself.’ He straightened abruptly, getting to his feet. ‘Whichever, it’s past and gone. What we have to deal with is the present. I’ll leave you to make your call.’

It wasn’t nearly time, she could have said, but she refrained, reluctant though she was to be left with only her thoughts for company. She watched him stride indoors, feeling the fast-becoming-familiar contraction in the region of her groin at the supple movement of his hard-packed thighs. The hunger in her owed nothing to memory, everything to instinct. She ached in every fibre.

She was still aching when Raymundo joined her some twenty minutes or so later, dropping into the chair vacated by his brother.

‘You should not be left alone to brood,’ he said. ‘Not in your condition.’

Karen turned a blank look. ‘Condition?’

‘Your memory loss. It must be difficult for you.’

‘It has to be difficult for everyone,’ she returned, following it up with a faint smile. ‘Apart from Regina. She won’t allow it to be.’

‘My sister adored you from the moment you arrived at Guavada,’ he claimed extravagantly. ‘As did everyone.’

Karen allowed herself an edge of sarcasm. ‘Everyone?’

Raymundo gave a wry shrug. ‘Sadly, my wife allows jealousy to impair her judgement. Until your arrival, she was the...’

‘Queen bee?’ Karen supplied as he hesitated over the term.

His smile was a little discomfited. 'Mistress of the household, I believe you would call it. Handing over that charge to you was hard for her.'

'She must have known Luiz would marry some day,' Karen protested, wondering if Raymundo could possibly be as blind to his wife's true feelings as Regina had made out.

'But perhaps to someone content to allow things to stay the same.'

'Which I obviously wasn't.'

The smile came again, wry this time. 'No. Nor, I think, would Luiz have been happy had you been. He loved your spirit as well as your beauty. He...'

He broke off, shaking his head in rueful recollection. 'I speak in the past tense. Luiz loves you still, I'm sure of it.'

'I take it Beatriz made no mention of her suspicions to you either?' Karen said after a moment.

'No.' He looked discomfited again. 'She told no one until Luiz found you gone. He was angry with her for keeping it from him, but all she had was suspicion.'

'Odd, that no one else appears to have had any notion.'

'Women are renowned for their intuition,' he said with a certain reserve.

Karen left it there, sensing that she wasn't going to get any further. The more she heard, the more she suspected that Beatriz might have somehow set her up. Proving it was another matter, but at the very least it gave her some hope.

Dubious though she was that Julie could be of any help, she still needed to speak to her. She was the only contact she had with home. It was only half past ten, but she could wait no longer.

'I have to make a phone call,' she said, getting up. 'Can I dial direct to England?'

'Providing you know your country code,' Raymundo confirmed. 'You may have some difficulty getting through. The lines are often busy.'

'I'll manage.'

She made her escape, heading back indoors. She reached her bedroom without running into anyone, closing the door before crossing to the telephone on the bedside table. So far as memory went, she'd last spoken to Julie the day before she'd woken up in the hospital. In reality, she had no idea just how long it had been.

As Raymundo had warned, it took a little time and effort to get the call through. Even when the connection was made, an age seemed to pass before the receiver was lifted. The voice on the other end of the line sounded sleepy.

'Can't a body have a lie in on a Saturday morning, for heaven's sake? It's not even eight!'

'Julie, it's me,' Karen said swiftly. 'Sorry about the time.'

'That's okay.' She sounded wide awake now, though still far from her normal vibrant self. 'How are you, Karen? It's been ages! My fault mostly, I have to admit. I changed my job. Just never got round to answering your last call. Anyway, how's it going? Still madly in love with that gorgeous Brazilian hunk?'

'Of course.' It was all Karen could say. It was obvious that she'd passed nothing at all on to the other girl, which meant there was little to be gained from telling her about her memory loss, with all the subsequent explanations. 'I just thought I'd give you a call,' she tagged on lamely. 'I must have miscalculated the time difference.'

‘You’re forgiven.’ Julie was fast recovering from the guilt she apparently felt over her tardiness in making contact. ‘What’s the weather like over there? It’s raining cats and dogs here!’

‘Fine.’ The last thing Karen felt like was an exchange of weather details. ‘A good move, was it, the new job?’

‘Sure was! I’ve met the most wonderful man! Not a patch on your Luiz, of course, but it’s given to few of us to be quite *that* lucky in love! I must say, I thought you’d gone utterly mad when you rang to say you were never coming back, but then I thought you were utterly mad spending all your winnings on a trip to Rio in the first place. I’m just so glad it’s all turned out so well.’

There was a pause, as if in anticipation of some response, a slight change of tone. ‘Everything *is* all right, isn’t it?’

If there had been any hesitation left in Karen’s mind, it was banished now. ‘Of course,’ she said. ‘Couldn’t be better! I’m really happy you’ve found someone yourself, Julie. I hope it works out.’

The two of them chatted a while longer about general matters, parting on the promise to keep in more regular contact from now on. Karen replaced the receiver with a heavy heart, suspecting that the friendship would continue to slide. Not that she blamed Julie for neglecting to call. She had her own life to lead: a very full one, by all accounts.

What *she* had to concentrate on now was attempting to rebuild the relationship she’d destroyed by running away—whatever her reason for doing it. According to Raymundo, Luiz still loved her, but how could he know that? Luiz was unlikely to have confided his innermost feelings.

Without proof, there was no way she was going to convince him that there had been no affair; she couldn’t be wholly convinced herself, if it came to that. So all she could do was try to wipe out the hurt. If that meant putting her pride on the line and risking rebuff, then so be it. One way or another, she was going to get this marriage back on track.

She went through the day in a fever of anticipation mingled with apprehension. The way Luiz made her feel, there was no physical barrier: desire, it seemed, transcended memory loss. She wanted his lovemaking, wanted desperately to be reminded of how it felt to be nude in his arms, to have his hands exploring her body, his lips seeking hers.

Just how deep her feelings had gone, there was no way of knowing, though it seemed unlikely that she’d have married him for sex alone, however wonderful.

On the other hand, even if her suspicions regarding the supposed affair turned out to be right, she still had to find a reason why she had left him.

She was getting nowhere with this, Karen decided wryly. If she didn’t want to drive herself mad, she had to put the whole thing aside and start again from here.

With both Beatriz and Raymundo out for the evening, dinner was a more relaxed occasion—or would have been if she hadn’t been on tenterhooks over her plans for later. The temptation to shelve everything and wait for Luiz himself to make another approach was great.

Keyed up, she knocked over her water glass, cascading liquid across the table.

‘You seem tense,’ Luiz remarked when the mopping up was done and order restored. ‘Is your head troubling you again?’

‘No, it’s fine,’ Karen assured him. ‘I was just clumsy, that’s all.’

‘I’ve done the same thing myself on occasion,’ chimed in Regina. ‘At least it was only water.’ She gave a girlish giggle. ‘I once tipped a whole glass of red wine over a guest. She was most annoyed.’

‘Understandably,’ her brother returned drily. ‘Her clothing was ruined.’

‘Only because she refused to allow me to practise the remedy I read about and throw white wine over the stains,’ came the unperturbed reply. ‘One is supposed to bleach out the other. Have you heard of that, Karen?’

‘Actually, yes,’ Karen agreed. ‘Although I can’t say I’ve ever tried it.’ She smiled at the younger girl, grateful for the intervention she suspected was designed to switch Luiz’s attention. ‘We’ll have to experiment some time just in case.’

‘What time shall we be expected at this barbecue tomorrow?’ she added, looking for more diversion.

‘Any time from noon onwards,’ Regina answered. ‘People arrive when they feel like it. The food will be cooking all day. You must not worry about seeing everyone. They will all do their utmost, I’m sure, to be at ease with you.’

Easier said than done from both sides, Karen reflected. Rather worse for herself, considering she would have a whole lot of names to fit to faces. Hopefully, everyone would speak at least some English, because her grasp of Portuguese showed little sign of returning as yet.

She could feel Luiz’s eyes on her, penetrating her defences. Without glancing in his direction, she was vitally aware of his lean length, his breadth of shoulder and depth of chest. The tailored trousers he was wearing enclosed the essence of his masculinity: the part of him that had been a part of her, that had sown the seed from which the baby she had lost had begun to grow. It felt so strange to know that yet have no physiological concept of it.

Once again, Luiz simply said goodnight when she announced her intention of retiring around eleven. Karen went to her room still in a state of flux. It was only a bare four days since she had woken up to all this in the clinic. There was no denying the desire Luiz aroused in her, but was it enough on its own? Had it ever been enough?

While reluctant to believe that she might have married him on the crest of that particular wave, the possibility had to be faced that it was the lack of any deeper emotion that had caused her to make a break for freedom.

That the same reason might be given for seeking an affair was something she refused to contemplate. Whatever Lucio Fernandes had been doing on that plane, he hadn’t been with her, she was certain of it.

She was in bed, though far from sleep, when Luiz entered the next room. She lay listening to the faint sounds, waiting for the silence that would tell her he was in bed himself.

Even then, it was another half an hour before she finally forced her limbs into movement, closing her mind to the misgivings. Something had to be done; they couldn’t go on like this. If she hadn’t loved him with any depth before, she could learn to do it now. In three short months, she’d hardly given it a chance.

She eased the door open as quietly as possible. The room beyond was in darkness, the bed on the far side lit only by a stray gleam of moonlight. Karen hesitated on the threshold, fighting the urge to turn back. She stifled a gasp when Luiz rolled over and sat up.

‘What is it?’ he asked. ‘Are you ill?’

‘No.’ Her voice sounded thick. ‘I thought...I wanted...’ She drew in another breath as he put out an arm with the obvious intention of reaching for a lamp switch. ‘Don’t put the light on, please!’

His arm fell back. Highlighting the white linen sheet covering the lower half of his body, the moonlight left the rest of him in shadow. Only when he leaned forward a little did she see that he was naked from at least the waist up. Eyes adjusting, she viewed the dark curls of hair across his chest with a leap in an already racing pulse rate, feeling her nipples peak in what could only be anticipation.

‘You wanted?’ he prompted after a moment.

‘You,’ she said before she could lose it altogether. ‘I want *you*, Luiz!’

There was no immediate reaction. His skin looked like oiled silk in the moonlight. Face still partially shadowed, he gazed across at her. When he did speak it was in low, controlled tones.

‘Why?’

Karen’s mind grappled with the unexpected question. Surely the answer was obvious.

‘Because it’s driving me crazy!’ she burst out. ‘Because I can’t bear another minute of feeling the way you make me feel without doing something about it! I realise how difficult it must be for you believing I’ve been with another man, and I know you’re not going to believe me when I say *I know I haven’t*.’

‘*How* do you know?’

‘I just do,’ she said. ‘Call it instinct. Call it what you like.’

The pause was lengthy, his expression—what she could see of it—giving nothing away. ‘You’re suggesting that Beatriz was lying?’ he said at length.

About to confirm, Karen bit the words back, settling for a compromise instead. ‘Or simply mistaken.’

‘Then how would you explain Fernandas’s name on the passenger list?’

‘I can’t,’ she admitted. ‘I can’t explain what *I* was doing on that plane, much less him! I suppose it’s possible we’ll never know, but if I’m to stay here—’

‘There’s no question of anything other,’ came the harsh interruption.

Karen spread her hands. ‘Fine. I accept that. Only we both have to make the effort to put things right between us. If you turn me down now...’

‘You think me capable of it?’

He threw back the sheet, revealing his nudity all the way down. He was already fully and heart-jerkingly aroused. Karen felt her stomach muscles contract, the heat rush through her.

‘You’re right,’ he said on a softer note. ‘Our only recourse is to wipe the past from mind. Come.’

Heart thudding like a trip hammer, every nerve-ending in her body on fire, she reached the bed.

‘Take off your gown,’ Luiz instructed, still in the same tone. ‘Let me see you.’

Karen reached for the thin straps with fingers that felt nerveless, sliding them down over her shoulders to let the heavy silk glide to the floor at her feet. She felt no reticence in revealing herself to him, only gratification at the look she saw in the eyes scanning every inch of her body.

He said something in his own language, the words foreign to her ears yet somehow understandable. When he held out a hand to her, she went willingly into his arms.

She had longed to feel those supple hands of his on her body, and he left no part of her untouched. She writhed in ecstasy beneath his caresses, opening herself to him with a wantonness she would never have believed herself capable of, clutching in a frenzy of sensation at the lowered dark head as he penetrated her innermost being.

She felt no reticence either in returning the caresses, pressing lingering, teasing kisses down the muscular length of him to bring him almost to the point of climax with the wicked use of tongue and teeth.

When he finally turned her under him, her legs wrapped themselves almost of their own accord about his hips, her whole body arching to the incredible feel of him sliding inside her, carrying her with him on a

roller coaster ride to sheer heaven. She climaxed only a bare moment before he did, her cries mingling with his deep down groans.

‘Has it always been like that between us?’ she whispered when she could speak at all, hardly able to believe her own overwhelming passion.

Luiz lifted his head, eyes fathomless pools in the dim light. ‘Perhaps not quite the same.’

‘Meaning you had to teach me how to...respond?’

‘Only in the sense of releasing you from the inhibitions covering your true nature.’ He lifted a hand to smooth the tumbled damp hair back from her face, lingering to caress the smooth line of her cheek. ‘The first time I took you was an experience I will never forget. You were so anxious to please me, so apologetic for your lack of experience, so unaware of what it means to a man to be the first to make love to a woman. You offered me your beautiful tempting lips to kiss, your lovely body to do with as I would.’

‘When did you decide you wanted to marry me?’ Karen murmured.

He gave a brief smile. ‘I was captivated for life the moment I set eyes on you.’

‘You really would have wanted to marry me even if I hadn’t proved to be a virgin?’

‘As I already told you on Corcovado, yes. The virginity was, as the Americans would say, the icing on the cake.’

‘You’re American yourself,’ she said.

‘*South* American,’ he corrected. ‘A world of difference!’ His tone softened again as if in reminiscence. ‘I only discovered your lack of experience when you revealed it in fear that you would be unable to satisfy me.’

Karen was silent for a moment or two, trying to break through the fog in her mind, giving up because it was a hopeless exercise. She brought her own hand up to lightly trace the lips that had given her so much pleasure, registering the desire building in her again without surprise. Whether what she felt for this man had been more than just a physical need before her memory loss, she still couldn’t say, but what she was feeling right now surely went beyond it.

‘There’s no way I could ever have turned to another man while I had you!’ she declared with passion. ‘You have to believe it, Luiz!’

‘We agreed to put the matter aside,’ he returned on a resolute note. ‘Until your memory returns, there is no other way.’

If it didn’t return the question would never be answered, whispered a treacherous little voice at the back of her mind. Affair or no affair, *something* had moved her into taking flight.

She blanked the thought out as Luiz bent his lips to hers once more.

It was apparent from the way Regina regarded the two of them at breakfast that she had noted a difference in attitude this morning. Judging from the looks Beatriz directed their way, she was aware of it too, and not at all happy about it.

Karen forced herself to ignore the glances. She and Luiz might only have achieved a partial reconciliation last night, but it was a vital part. Recovering her memory could even be a bad thing in the long run, came the thought. What she didn’t know couldn’t hurt her.

‘I must get down to learning the language again,’ she declared. ‘I obviously didn’t find it too difficult before.’ She gave a laugh. ‘I bet I’m one of the few people to have to do it twice!’

‘Very possibly the only one,’ Luiz returned. ‘You may even find your ear already attuned.’

‘I’ll help all I can,’ offered Regina eagerly. ‘Good morning is *bom dia*, good afternoon *boa tarde*, although you—’

‘I think Karen may have already worked out the basics for herself,’ her brother interjected drily.

Regina lowered her head, the quirk of her lips belying the apparent humility. ‘*Desculpe*,’ she murmured. ‘*Me perdoe*, Karen.’

‘There’s nothing to be sorry for,’ Karen answered, taking a guess at the meaning. ‘Any help at all is welcome.’

‘I was just going to say that you need no formal address to greet people who already know you,’ her sister-in-law returned, casting a sly glance in Luiz’s direction. ‘*Oi* will be sufficient.’

Meaning hello, Karen surmised, doubtful if she could produce quite the same sound. She still felt daunted at the thought of meeting these people Regina was speaking of, but it had to be done. At least none of them would be aware of what she’d really been doing in Rio.

She shelved *that* thought before it could get going.

Neither Raymundo nor Beatriz showed any interest in attending the barbecue. Karen felt more than a little impatient with her brother-in-law, who seemed totally under his wife’s thumb. The antithesis of Luiz in character if not in looks.

The Ferrez home was a sprawling, single-storey villa set in grounds which for the most part appeared to have been left to prolific nature. There were already a dozen or more people there when the three of them arrived, the women dressed casually in shorts and sun tops as Regina had advised Karen to dress.

There was some awkwardness, but Karen had expected that. It was impossible for anyone to face a situation such as this with equanimity. She had mingled with these people for three months—had no doubt been hostess to similar gatherings at Guavada—yet not one face or name meant anything to her. Not everyone spoke English either, which didn’t help.

Luiz stayed close at first. She did her best to cope when one of the men stole him from her side to discuss some matter or other, but she could feel the panic building inside her. These people were total strangers to her. How could she be expected to handle the situation on her own? Half the time she didn’t even understand what they were saying!

In danger of losing what composure she still retained, she sought a few minutes respite in a quiet corner of the gardens. The sky was clear overhead, though cloud was gathering on the horizon. She found a seat on a stone bench, lifting her face to the sun, eyes closed against the glare. Her head felt as if it were packed with cotton wool.

‘You have no drink,’ said a voice.

Karen opened her eyes again with reluctance to view the man holding a wine bottle and two glasses. He had, she assumed, followed her. She sought her immediate memory for a name. Jorge Arroyo, if she had it right. Around Luiz’s age, and good looking in a flashy way, he had struck her as a man with a pretty high opinion of himself. A man Luiz himself had little time for, she’d gathered.

‘I’ve had enough to drink, thanks,’ she declined. ‘I just needed a little time on my own.’

The hint went unheeded. ‘I sympathise with you,’ he said. ‘Even more so with Luiz. He was the envy of us all when he first brought you here, but he would, I think, as soon have lost you to another man than be cast so completely from mind.’

Convinced for a heart-jerking moment that he was referring to Lucio Fernandes, Karen only just stopped herself from blurting out a denial. She was hearing innuendo where none existed, she thought wryly.

‘At least we’re still together,’ she said.

‘But can it ever be the same for you?’

She lifted her shoulders, trying to keep a level head. ‘As I can’t remember what it was like before, that’s hardly a question I can answer. Your English is excellent,’ she added in an effort to steer him away from personal probing.

‘We were able to converse in Portuguese just a short time ago,’ he returned. ‘The mind plays strange tricks.’

The ‘we’ disturbed her in its intimation that the two of them had shared many such conversations. There was something about the man that roused an instinctive wariness.

Luiz emerged from the shrubbery, taking in the little scene in one rapier glance.

‘I’ve been searching for you,’ he said tautly. ‘Have you eaten?’

Karen shook her head, aware of his anger, and resenting it. ‘Not yet.’

‘Then you’ll come now.’

She got to her feet, casting an uncomfortable glance in passing at the man who might not be there at all for what notice Luiz was taking of him.

‘Why did you leave the others?’ he demanded as they headed back along the path.

‘I needed a respite,’ she answered, equally shortly.

‘Jorge followed you?’

Karen winged a glance at the set features, reluctant to go on the defensive yet sensing a need to clarify the situation. ‘I didn’t ask him to accompany me, if that’s what you’re thinking.’ She hesitated a moment before adding, ‘Do you have something specific against him, or is it just a general antipathy?’

‘It’s enough for you to know that he isn’t a man to be trusted,’ was the short response.

She was going to get no more than that for certain, Karen acknowledged. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know more anyway.

If anyone else had noted her absence, nothing was said. Food was both plentiful and excellent, the steaks the biggest she’d ever seen. She wondered if the meat came from Guavada.

‘Most goes for export,’ Luiz confirmed when she asked. ‘But yes, we supply the surrounding areas. There’s a small abattoir in the town.’ Her involuntary wince drew a dry smile. ‘A fact of life. The meat apart, the very sandals you’re wearing owe their existence to animal hide.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘I know it’s silly to be squeamish about it too, but I—’

‘But the English love of animals extends itself to all species.’ He paused a moment, viewing her with enigmatic eyes. ‘Perhaps you’d like a pet of your own?’

Conscious of the tension still existing between them, she was taken aback by the offer. ‘I’d love a dog,’ she admitted. ‘My parents always had one.’

‘Then I’ll see what can be arranged. Although you would have to teach it to stay away from the river. Alligators make no exceptions.’

‘If there are alligators in the river, I’ll make darn sure *I* stay away from it,’ she said with feeling, realising just how much she had to relearn about her life here. ‘What else do I need to look out for?’

‘Cougars, rattlesnakes.’ Luiz smiled again briefly at the look on her face. ‘I tease you. Few people are faced with any heart-racing encounters.’

A foot lifted casually to rest on the edge of a wooden flower tub, shorts drawn taut across muscular thigh, he was heart-racing enough himself. Karen felt desire rising in her. She wished they were alone. Only then might they stand a chance of recapturing last night’s togetherness.

‘I think it’s time we went home,’ he said on a softer note.

Suggesting that he recognised her need was clear to him. That he was ready to set aside whatever doubts he still entertained to indulge his own need was also apparent. Not that she had any intention of denying either of them.

‘What about Regina?’ she asked.

‘Someone will bring her.’

Dona Ferrez made no protests over their early departure, accepting Karen’s plea of tiredness at face value. They had travelled here in the spacious leather-upholstered saloon that had brought them from the airport so few days ago. Head cradled against the rest as they headed back through the town, Karen contemplated the coming hour or two with growing fervour. Whatever else was missing from the marriage, nothing could take this away from them. Nothing!

CHAPTER SIX

WHILE the amnesia showed no sign of lifting in the main, Karen found herself picking up the basics of the language a great deal faster than she would have anticipated. Brazilian Portuguese was different from the European version. It was enriched by local Indian dialects, as well as African languages brought over in the past by slaves.

‘Did I ever manage to get my tongue round the vowels?’ she asked Luiz one evening, frustrated by her efforts to produce the right sound.

‘Not quite,’ he admitted. ‘But it will come in time.’ His expression had darkened a fraction. ‘Everything becomes easier in time.’

Apart from the one thing they could neither of them put completely aside, Karen acknowledged.

‘It might have been better for both of us if I’d never won that money,’ she said wryly. ‘If we’d never met.’

Luiz shook his head. ‘I see no use in speculation of that kind. What we have, we live with.’

Brushing her hair at the dressing table, Karen watched him in the mirror as he slid into the bed. He always slept in the nude, and insisted that she did too. Not that she objected.

They’d made love every one of the past ten nights. Tonight would be no exception. Her period had to be due some time soon, she realised. It had always been around the middle of the month—although pregnancy might have altered her cycle.

Luiz hadn’t mentioned the subject again, and she’d hesitated to bring it up herself. She wondered who the baby would have looked like. Had it been a boy or a girl?

Pregnancy. It was the first time she’d given a thought to the fact that Luiz never used any form of protection—and she certainly didn’t. The brush suspended in mid-stroke, she considered the implications, her emotions too confused to be separated.

Propped against the pillows now, Luiz eyed her speculatively.

‘Is there something you have to say?’

Her voice sounded husky. ‘You think another baby would bring us closer again?’

‘I think it could do no harm,’ he returned without missing a stroke. ‘There’s no physical reason to wait.’

‘We could have discussed it,’ she said. ‘You’d no right to make that decision on your own!’

Expression enigmatic, he said, ‘You don’t want a child?’

She caught herself up, biting her lip. ‘That’s not the point.’

‘Then what is?’

‘This whole situation!’

‘The situation is what we make of it from now,’ he returned. ‘We agreed to a fresh start. Are you saying you no longer want that?’

‘Of course I’m not! I just...’ She broke off, lifting her shoulders in a wry shrug. ‘I think it might be better to wait a while, that’s all.’

‘I disagree.’ The tone was unequivocal. ‘Are you coming to bed?’

Anger flared in her, jerking the words from her lips. ‘Not just to provide you with a son and heir!’

She regretted it the moment she’d said it. Luiz hadn’t moved, but his silence spoke volumes. She flung down the brush and got up to go to him, sinking down on the bed edge to lay her cheek against his chest. ‘That was unfair,’ she whispered.

He slid a hand into her hair to caress the nape of her neck, but she could feel the rigidity in him. ‘If you don’t feel ready,’ he said.

‘I do.’ She lifted her head to look at him, putting everything she had into convincing herself as well as him. ‘I want us to get back to where we were in the beginning. Anyway,’ she added, trying for a lighter note, ‘it could already be an accomplished fact. No use shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted!’

The smile that curved his lips failed to strike an answering spark in his eyes. ‘No use at all,’ he agreed.

Karen put her lips to the broad chest, allowing her instincts full sway as she kissed her way down to where the sheet lay across his hipline, thankful to feel his response. He was right. They had to carry on with their lives the way they would have done if there had been no disruption. Children were part and parcel of a marriage.

She could only hope the doctors had been right in their assessment of future risks.

The puppy Luiz brought in a couple of days later was a bit of a mixed variety with its roly-poly body, long tail and over-sized paws, but Karen was entranced from the word go. She named the little creature Samson to compensate for his lack of stature.

Beatriz, naturally, found everything wrong with having an animal of any kind loose in the house, although she tended to keep her opinions low-key when Luiz was within hearing.

‘She just looks for faults to find,’ Regina declared, enraptured herself with the new addition. ‘Luiz said Samson was one of a litter of five. Perhaps I could have one of the others for myself.’

That would really give Beatriz something to complain about, Karen reflected.

‘Would *you* ask Luiz?’ Regina added ingenuously. ‘He can refuse you nothing.’

Karen doubted that. Their relationship out of bed was nowhere near as clear-cut as it was in it.

‘I’ll try,’ she promised. ‘But don’t count on anything.’

His response when she did put Regina’s request that night wasn’t immediately encouraging. His sister had never shown any interest in animals as pets before this, he said. It would just be an impulse on her part.

‘If it did turn out to be, I’d happily be responsible for both animals,’ Karen declared. ‘But I think you’re doing her an injustice.’

‘You mean she’s unlikely to change her mind?’ he asked on an ironic note. ‘There are a number of past occasions which would give the lie to that.’

‘There’s a big difference between passing fancies in boyfriends and this,’ Karen protested.

‘You believe so?’ He studied her, his expression difficult to read. ‘Regina idolises you. You must realise that. Where you lead, she will follow. A responsibility in itself.’

‘I love her too.’ Karen could say that with truth. ‘Let her have the pup, Luiz. She’ll look after it, I’m certain.’

He inclined his head. ‘I’ll leave it to you to tell Beatriz.’

‘Coward,’ she taunted lightly, and saw a glint spring suddenly in his eyes.

He took a swift step forward and swung her up in his arms, carrying her across to dump her face down on the bed, holding her there with a hand between her shoulder blades. ‘Apologise, or pay the price,’ he threatened.

Karen held up her hands in mock surrender. ‘I apologise, I apologise!’

He turned her over but didn’t let her up, humour giving way to a more potent emotion as he surveyed her lovely laughing face. It would have been like this in the beginning, Karen thought yearningly, meeting his lips: so different from the trials and tribulations of the past weeks.

Lying sated but sleepless later, she wondered if a psychiatrist might help her break through the block in her memory. Or even a hypnotist.

Yet did she really want to know the truth? came the sneaking thought. Whatever it was that had sent her careering off to Rio, it was in the past, and probably best left that way.

Luiz stirred, the arm curved about her waist drawing her closer against him. The very feel of him was a stimulus. She ran her fingertips along one taut thigh, feeling the muscle tense to her touch. He opened his eyes as she found him, his response immediate.

‘I believed you satisfied,’ he said softly.

‘That was then,’ she responded, ‘this is now. It’s your own fault. You shouldn’t make it so fantastic!’

He gave a low laugh and rolled on top of her, joining the two of them together again in one fluid movement. ‘You may live to regret your boldness,’ he declared.

She may live to regret a lot of things, but never this! she thought.

Predictably, two healthy, lively pups left a certain amount of havoc in their wake. The household staff took a tolerant view, Beatriz anything but. More than once it was on the tip of Karen’s tongue to suggest that she and Raymundo find a home of their own if this one no longer suited, but it was Luiz’s place to make that decision, not hers.

The despondency she felt on receiving proof that she wasn’t pregnant went deeper than she would have anticipated. Luiz appeared philosophical about it, but she sensed his disappointment.

‘Supposing it never happens again?’ she said. ‘Supposing I can never give you a son to take over Guavada?’

‘Better the positive than the negative outlook,’ he returned. Eyes veiled, he drew her to him to kiss her. ‘There’s no shortage of time.’

Certainly no shortage of effort, Karen reflected, wondering how he was going to cope with several celibate nights, wondering how *she* was going to cope, for that matter.

It proved no problem because Luiz wouldn’t allow it to be. There were pleasure zones still to be explored, she found. If she had one wish, it would be for them both to be able to say the words that really

meant something, but there were too many unanswered questions for it to be likely. How could there be love where there was no trust?

March brought slightly cooler, though still pleasant temperatures, along with a sharp decrease in rainfall.

It was exactly six weeks since she'd woken up in that hospital bed, Karen realised one morning, checking the date; some four and a half months since she'd won the money that had totally changed her life.

The major part of that time was still a great big blank. She'd accepted the probability that it always would be. She still suffered the occasional nostalgic pang at the thought of what she'd left behind in England, but she had to admit that there was no comparison between the life she had led there and what she had here.

Her only real complaint was that she saw so relatively little of Luiz during the day. Apart from the time he spent out on the ranch, he had an office right here in the house equipped with enough technological paraphernalia to keep several businesses going. Unlike Raymundo, who was happy to sit back and allow others control of his affairs, he preferred full involvement.

'Maybe I could help out in some way?' she suggested one evening. 'I'm conversant with computers, and all that.'

Luiz laughed. 'I don't doubt your intelligence, but it isn't necessary.'

'Meaning you don't want me meddling in your affairs?' she responded on a note that drew a sudden line between the dark brows.

'Meaning I prefer to work alone. You surely have enough to occupy you. Especially now that you're driving again.' He studied her, the frown deepening. 'You find your life here boring?'

'No, of course not,' she denied. 'It's just so different from what I'm used to.'

'Your old life is almost six months past and gone,' he returned.

'Not to me,' she said. 'Or had you forgotten?'

She regretted the retort the moment the words left her lips, seeing his jaw harden. 'Joke!' she added in an attempt at humour that fell miserably flat.

'A very poor one,' he remarked. '*I can forget nothing!*'

'Luiz, I'm sorry!' Karen caught his arm as he made to turn away. 'I realise how hard it is for you too. I just...'

'You needed to hit out,' he finished for her as she broke off. 'I know the feeling well.' His lips slanted at the expression that sprang in her eyes. 'Not physically. You never had anything to fear from me in that sense.'

'I know,' she said, and saw the sardonic smile come again.

'You can't *know* anything about those three months.'

'I'm sure I'd sense it if I'd ever had cause to be afraid of you.' She was desperate to undo the harm she'd done. 'The same way I'd sense having been with any other man but you!'

For a lengthy moment he didn't move, searching her face feature by feature with an intensity that pierced her. Karen reached up to kiss him on the lips, putting everything she'd learned these last weeks into persuading the firmness to soften.

'I want you!' she whispered, abandoning all other trains of thought in the swift flaring of passion.

There was no verbal reply, just an answering flame in the dark eyes. Karen clung to him as he lifted her to carry her to the bed. This wasn't the answer to everything, but right now it was enough.

The pups showed signs of outstripping all expectations with regard to ultimate size. Banned from the house when Beatriz finally won the day after the pair of them ripped up a couple of rugs, they were given a new home in the grounds, complete with outside run and a kennel equipped, at Karen's demand, with heating against the chill of the coming winter nights. Regina had to a large extent lost interest in the animals, although she did play with them on occasion.

'I won't say I told you so,' Luiz remarked on finding Karen walking the two of them on her own one afternoon.

'You just did,' she returned. 'So you were right. It's no big problem.'

'It seems it might become a very big problem,' he said, assessing the difficulty she was having in controlling the pair. 'They're too strong for you now. How will you cope when they're fully grown?'

'They'll be trained by then,' she declared with more hope than faith. 'All it takes is perseverance.'

'Yes, I can see how well they're learning to obey you.'

The mockery lit a spark in her eyes. 'We can't all be despots!'

Dark brows lifted in sardonic amusement. 'A tyrant, am I?'

She had to smile. 'All right, so it was a bit over the top. Don't give Regina a hard time though. She'll think I've been complaining about her.'

'So you should,' he said. 'She puts too much reliance on your good nature.' He indicated that she hand over the leads. 'I'll walk them back to the compound and save a little wear and tear on your arm muscles.'

Karen obeyed, not in the least surprised when both animals followed the same impulse, falling into docile step at his side.

'You're not going to suggest Bruno goes, I hope,' she said tentatively. 'Samson would be lonely without him.'

'He can stay if you agree to let Carlos take the pair of them in hand.'

'Not if he's going to beat obedience into them. I won't have them cowed!'

'I'll make sure he treats them well.' There was a pause before he spoke again, his tone subtly altered. 'I have to go to Brasilia.'

'To see your mother?'

'I'll call on her while I'm there, but I have other business to attend to.'

Karen shot him a glance, drawn by some instinct she couldn't explain. His expression gave nothing away.

'How long will you be gone?' she asked.

'Two days, perhaps three. No more than that.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow.'

She swallowed on the sudden dryness in her throat, wondering if she was coming down with something. 'I'll miss you.'

His smile was brief. 'By night at least.'

It was a moment before she could find the words. 'You think sex is all I care about?'

'I think it plays a major part in our relationship,' he answered levelly. 'And always did.'

Karen forced herself to continue walking. 'You're saying I never felt any more than that for you?'

'I believe you convinced yourself that you did. I convinced myself for a time.'

'Until the day I proved otherwise by running out on you.' Her tone was as flat as his. 'You still believe I went off with Lucio Fernandes, don't you?'

'I can find no other reason,' he admitted. 'He left that same day without telling anyone he was going.'

She shook her head emphatically. 'There's no way I could have been drawn to a man of his type!'

'Many other women were. He was renowned for his conquests.'

'You've been making enquiries about him?'

'I needed none. His reputation was well-known.'

'But you still kept him in your employ.'

'Providing he does the job he's paid to do, a man's private life is his own.'

'Unless it encroaches on yours, of course!'

The sarcasm left him unmoved. 'True. Medical opinion appears to be that partial amnesia of the kind you're suffering from is the mind's way of blocking out what it doesn't want to remember. If the blockage is permanent, the only way I can ever be sure there was nothing between the two of you is to have him tell me so himself.'

'And how do you propose doing that, when you don't know where he is?'

'I've employed someone to try and trace him.'

Karen felt more than a flicker of apprehension. It was all very well to tell herself she wouldn't have gone near a man of the kind Lucio Fernandes appeared to be, but how could she be certain? How could she be certain of *anything*?

'I hope they succeed,' she said, knowing it was only a half-truth.

Luiz left the subject alone after that, but it was obvious that it was never going to stop preying on his mind. It had begun preying on her own again. Lucio Fernandes had been on the same flight on the same day after walking out on his job without a word to anyone. What other explanation was there?

They had people coming to dinner that evening. Nothing too formal, just a gathering of friends. Karen chose a slub silk skirt and sleeveless top, sliding her feet into high-heeled sandals. With the pups to exercise several times a day, she'd become accustomed to wearing flats. It felt good to stand tall again.

Her prowess in the language made socialising a great deal easier. If anyone felt any awkwardness over her amnesia these days, they hid it well.

Even Beatriz made some effort to conceal her feelings in company. Watching her surreptitiously as she conversed with the man seated next to her, Karen thought how different she looked when she smiled. There was no chance, she knew, of them ever becoming friends. She had the man Beatriz had really wanted. Nothing was going to change that.

Raymundo might appear to be oblivious of his wife's preference, but he couldn't be totally unaware. She often felt like telling him to stand up for himself when Beatriz was in one of her moods and finding fault with everything he said or did, but she held it back. Luiz had simply shrugged when she brought the subject up, and said it was up to Raymundo to command some respect. Beatriz certainly took no liberties with him.

Seated at the head of the table, the pure white silk of his shirt a foil for the olive skin of his face and throat, he made her ache. He was so wrong when he said sex was the driving force in their relationship. A vital force, yes, but there was so much more to the emotions he aroused in her now.

If she'd felt as deeply as this for him before, wild horses couldn't have dragged her away from him, she was sure. So what had made the difference?

With the night-time temperature a little too cool now for coffee out on the veranda, the party adjourned to one of the spacious living rooms. Conversation went on apace. Karen did her best to keep up, but her mind wasn't really on it. She didn't even know what time Luiz was planning on leaving tomorrow, she realised.

Regina came to sit beside her, her lovely young face lit by an inner glow.

'So what do you think of him?' she asked eagerly.

Karen brought her thoughts back to the here and now, wrinkling her brow in query. 'Think of whom?'

'Miran, of course. Miran Villota!'

Karen turned her attention to the young man in question. Miran was in his mid-twenties and extremely good-looking, with a dashing air about him scheduled to appeal to any girl. He was visiting the Ferrez's, hence his inclusion in tonight's invitation.

'He seems nice enough,' she pronounced.

'Nice!' Regina looked affronted. 'Is that all you can say?'

Karen kept her face straight with an effort. 'What else would you like me to say? I've only spoken with him a couple of times. Hardly enough to make an evaluation.'

'I find him excellent in every way,' Regina claimed. 'He lives and works in São Paulo, but he travels a great deal too. He knows so much of the world!'

'Is that what you'd like yourself?' Karen asked. 'To travel, I mean?'

'Of course. There are many places I want to see. I could do that with Miran.'

Karen held up a staying hand. 'Whoa a minute! You only just met him!'

'You told me you knew the moment you saw Luiz that he was the one,' came the rejoinder. 'I feel the same way about Miran.'

Nonplussed, Karen said cautiously, 'But does he feel the same way about you?'

The dark eyes glowed. 'He tells me so.'

'When did he do that?'

'When we were together at the table. He said I'm the most beautiful girl he's ever seen. He said he has never felt such an instant rapport before with anyone!'

Karen hardly knew what to answer. She'd noticed the two of them talking together once or twice, but had been too involved in the conversations going on around her to pay much attention.

'All the same, it's a bit soon to be thinking along the lines you're thinking,' she ventured.

'Why?' Regina demanded. 'It happened for you and Luiz, why not for Miran and me? I was never so certain of anything as I am of this!'

'You were certain you wanted a puppy not so long ago,' Karen pointed out, instantly regretting the remark. 'Sorry, that was unfair,' she apologised.

'Yes, it was.' Regina's chin was up, her eyes sparkling. 'Miran is not to be compared with a pet animal!'

'Of course not.' Karen hesitated, still not sure how best to tackle the situation. 'I believe he'll be here for several days?'

'Four more days,' Regina confirmed. 'We're to meet tomorrow in La Santa for lunch together.'

It was hardly fair to dismiss her sister-in-law's feelings for Miran Villota out of hand, Karen decided. His either, for that matter. As a friend of the Ferrez family, he surely had to be trustworthy.

'I'll look forward to hearing more tomorrow then,' she said.

It was almost two in the morning before everyone left. Karen saw Regina and Miran exchanging meaningful glances on his departure, although there was no physical contact between them.

'I think it a good thing Miran will only be here for a few days,' Luiz commented as they prepared for bed, proving he hadn't been blind to the exchange either. 'He's no unseasoned youth.'

'He can't be all that much older than I am,' Karen murmured.

'In years, perhaps. In experience...' He left the sentence unfinished, his tone enough.

Definitely *not* the time to tell him what Regina had in mind, Karen reflected wryly. He might have gone overboard himself at one time, but he was unlikely to view Regina's captivation in the same light.

'Men tend to be, don't they?' she said, trying for a humorous tone. 'More experienced, I mean. You certainly were.'

He gave her an ironic glance. 'How can you be sure of that?'

She laughed. 'You wouldn't try claiming I was the first for you too?'

'Perhaps not. But I was always selective.'

'Perhaps Miran Villota has been too,' she said.

Luiz studied her thoughtfully. 'Why do you feel it necessary to defend him?'

'I'm just suggesting that you could be wrong about him, that's all.'

'An opinion based on a few minutes conversation?'

'I'm going on instinct,' she claimed. 'Feminine instinct.'

'Not always dependable.'

'What time will you be leaving in the morning?' Karen asked, wishing she'd kept her mouth shut.

It was obvious from his expression that he found the change of subject questionable, but he responded. 'My flight is at noon. I must leave here no later than eight-thirty.'

It was half past two now, which gave them a good five hours before they need get up, Karen calculated. She thrust all other thoughts aside as she slid into the bed alongside him, heart racing as always in anticipation when he turned to her. Little more than a brushing of his lips, the kiss left her high and dry.

He was asleep within moments, to judge from his breathing. Lying there in the darkness, Karen took herself to task for feeling deprived. So it was the first time he'd failed to make love to her in one way or another. There had to be a first time. With a lengthy drive to the airport ahead of him, he needed to be alert.

There was more to it than that, she knew. He hadn't liked her seeming defence of Miran. She'd been doing it for Regina's sake, but he wasn't to know that. In his eyes, the interest was hers.

She considered waking him to tell him it was nonsense, but it was probably best to let the whole thing lie. By the time he returned, Regina would hopefully have come to her senses, and Miran Villota could be forgotten by all.

It was a long time before she slept, and already well gone nine when she awoke. There wasn't much point rushing around in the hope that Luiz hadn't yet left, she acknowledged disconsolately. The house already felt empty.

Regina greeted her eagerly when she finally went down. She was still over the moon with regard to Miran, still convinced that she had found the love of her life.

'Today I tell him what I feel for him,' she declared happily.

Karen wondered just what his reaction would be. Everything Regina had told her he had said to her last night was no more than any man might say to any woman he was attracted to. Any Latin, at any rate. Yes, he'd asked to see her today, but it didn't add up to all that much. So far, they hadn't even kissed!

Regina was still starry-eyed when she returned from the lunch date, although a little disappointed that Miran had declined her invitation to come back with her. He had business to take care of, she said. They hadn't actually discussed the future yet. They'd had so much else to talk about.

'He is so wonderful!' She sighed. 'I told him how you and Luiz knew instantly that you were meant for each other too.'

'What did he say to that?' asked Karen tentatively.

'He thought it very romantic. As it was, of course. As it is now for the two of us!'

'So when are you seeing him again?'

'He is to telephone me to make the arrangement.'

Hardly the action of a man reluctant to be parted from his loved one for longer than absolutely necessary, Karen reflected, though who was she to judge?

'You realise Luiz is unlikely to approve?' she said.

'Luiz can't stop me marrying Miran,' came the undaunted response.

He'd certainly have a darn good try, Karen thought. Not that she was convinced it was any of it more than pie in the sky as yet. The only way to find out what Miran's feelings really were was to ask him outright, and at the earliest opportunity.

How to get in touch was the problem. She could telephone the Ferrez home and ask to speak to him, but considering Luiz's attitude last night, and the possibility of his discovering she had made the call, that might not be a good idea. Lucio Fernandes still loomed too large in their lives.

The problem was resolved when she was called to the phone herself that evening. Expecting it to be Luiz on the line, she was nonplussed when the call turned out to be from Miran.

‘I have to talk with you,’ he said urgently. ‘About Regina?’ Karen asked.

‘About Regina, yes,’ he said. ‘I can’t discuss the matter now. Someone might hear. Will you meet with me?’

She hesitated, already suspecting the truth. ‘You should speak with Regina herself.’

‘I can’t do that. Please! I beg of you!’

Short of refusing point-blank, she was left with little choice, Karen accepted resignedly. She should have told Luiz what was going on last night and let him sort it all out.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘Where and when?’

‘I have commitments in the morning, and for lunch, but I’ll be free by half past three. I’ll wait at the market square. I must go now,’ he added before she could answer.

Karen replaced the receiver feeling anything but happy with the arrangement. There was no market in town tomorrow, but there would still be plenty of people around the square. She was pretty sure what Miran was going to say. Regina had gained entirely the wrong impression, and he didn’t know how to tell her.

Which meant she was probably going to get the job.

‘Was that Luiz?’ Beatriz asked.

Karen forced herself to turn without haste to view the woman standing a few yards away. ‘Yes,’ she said, realising she would have a hard time explaining if Luiz happened to ring while they were standing here. ‘He had a good journey,’ she added lamely.

Beatriz curled a lip. ‘That is all he had to say to you?’

‘No.’ Karen was hard put to it to keep a civil tongue in her head. ‘The rest is between husband and wife.’

‘You can hide from the truth, but you can’t escape it for ever!’ Beatriz spat after her as she started to turn away.

It was something in her tone as much as the words themselves that pulled Karen up. The shaft of pain lancing her head was reminiscent of that day back on Corcovado when she’d first heard Beatriz’s name mentioned. She swallowed thickly on the sudden blockage in her throat.

‘What are you talking about?’ she managed to get out.

The malice in the amber eyes was soul-searing. ‘You think the business Luiz has in Brasilia concerns Guavada. If you wish to remind yourself of what it does concern, you’ll find the proof in his office desk.’

Karen stood rooted to the spot for several moments after Beatriz left her. Her head was gripped by a vice, her mind spinning in endless circles out of which no coherent thought emerged. When she did eventually move it was like an automaton obeying a programmed instruction.

She had only been in the office a couple of times these past weeks. Standing in the doorway, she surveyed the room with eyes blanked of all expression.

The big dark wood desk was by the window, flanked by others bearing various pieces of equipment. She crossed to it, ignoring the papers spread across the surface to start rifling through the drawers.

She found what she wasn't even sure she was looking for in one of the bottom ones. Face ravishingly lovely beneath gleaming coils of black hair, the girl portrayed was no more than eighteen. She held a child on her lap: a boy of perhaps two years old, his dark curly hair and emerging features only too recognisable.

The photograph gripped in her hand, Karen sank nervelessly into the chair as the fog finally lifted...

CHAPTER SEVEN

TALL and lean, shoulders broad beneath the close fitting white T-shirt, he drew every female eye in the vicinity. Karen was no exception. The lurch in the pit of her stomach as she took in the planes and angles of his face beneath the pelt of curly black hair needed no explanation. There was no shortage of good-looking macho males in Rio, but he was the first to have this effect on her on mere sight.

He paused in the restaurant doorway, surveying the crowded room without haste. Karen shifted her gaze back to her plate as his eyes came to rest on her, feeling the increase in her pulse rate. In a country where most women were dark-haired, her colouring alone made her stand out. She'd been subjected to several unwelcome approaches since she'd arrived in Rio. The price to be paid by a woman travelling alone.

Her stomach muscles jerked again as the *maître d'* appeared at her elbow.

'We have a problem, *senhorita*,' he said deferentially. 'This is the only table with a seat not taken. Would you allow Senhor Andrade the use of it?'

Karen didn't need to look beyond him to know who Senhor Andrade was. She could sense his presence. There was only one response she could make without appearing churlish—and churlishness was farthest from her mind right now.

'Of course,' she said.

The smile her new companion gave her as he slid into the chair directly opposite was devastating. She could only hope her expression was as unrevealing as she tried to make it.

'This is very accommodating of you,' he said in excellent though heavily accented English. 'You're here on vacation?'

'Holiday,' she corrected lightly. 'In England we say holiday. And yes, I am.'

'Alone?'

Her chin tilted, green eyes acquiring a faint spark. 'Yes.'

'Rio is no place for a woman like you to visit alone,' he declared. 'Your hair alone is a beacon.'

'Maybe I should consider dyeing it,' she said with deliberate flippancy.

'That would be a crime in itself.'

He took the menu from the waiter who had just appeared and ran his eyes down it, reeled off the name of a dish and handed it back with a request for the wine waiter to attend.

'You will join me in a glass of wine?' he asked.

Be a bit of a tight fit, it was on the tip of her tongue to retort; she bit it back because humour of such an infantile kind was unlikely to be appreciated.

'Thank you, but I'm quite happy with the water,' she said, with a sudden notion that she was going to need to keep a steady head.

Dark as night, his regard gave her palpitations. She wanted to look away, but she couldn't, mesmerised by the tiny amber sparks deep down in the blackness.

'My name is Luiz,' he said. 'The management will vouch for me if you find it necessary.'

'Why might I find it necessary?' she asked, and saw the firmly moulded mouth take on a curve that set her pulses racing all over again.

'Why indeed?' The pause was brief. 'You still have to tell me your name.'

'It's Karen Downing.'

'Karen.' His voice caressed the word. 'You're very beautiful. Too much so to be alone by anything but choice. Is there no man in your life?'

Not until now, came the unbidden thought.

'I'm footloose and fancy free,' she quipped, trying to keep a grip on herself. 'To travel alone is to travel fastest!'

'Have you been long in Brazil?'

'Just three days. I've wanted to visit Rio ever since I first saw it in a travelogue.'

'And does it meet with your expectations?'

'The scenery certainly does. I went up Sugar Loaf yesterday. The view is tremendous!'

'The view from Corcovado is even more spectacular,' he said. 'I'll drive you up there this afternoon through the rainforest.'

Karen gazed at him with lifted brows, fighting the mad inclination to just go along with anything he suggested. 'You're taking rather a lot for granted.'

'No more than my senses tell me should be taken.' The tone was soft, his gaze spellbinding. 'You'd deny the attraction between us?'

'We only just met,' she protested faintly.

'But we were destined to meet,' he said. 'I've waited many years for this moment—this certainty. You feel it too.'

Right now, Karen wasn't sure *what* she felt. Her head was spinning. He was right about the attraction—her every sense was fired by it—but giving way to it was another matter.

'I really don't think—' she began.

'Then don't think,' he cut in. 'Just follow what your heart tells you. You want what I want. *Everything* I want! I see it in your eyes.'

Coming from any other man, she would have called that the most supreme egotism, but what he said was too close to the truth to be dismissed that way. She'd been attracted to men on occasion, but never physically aroused as she was right now. Her skin felt as if ants were crawling over it, her insides turned fluid.

Go with it, an inner voice urged. Live dangerously for once!

She gave a slightly shaky laugh. 'As a line, I have to admit it's a good one!'

'I speak no line. Only what I feel. You stir me the way no other woman ever stirred me.'

‘Why?’ she queried helplessly.

‘Your beauty alone could be reason enough, but I sense a great deal more to you than that. Fate brought you here to Rio for a purpose.’

‘A lottery win brought me here,’ she said on as pragmatic a note as she could manage. ‘I could never have afforded it otherwise. It will almost all be gone by the time I get home, so if it’s money you’re after...’

She broke off as amusement danced in his eyes. ‘You think I appear in need of money?’ he asked.

‘No,’ she admitted. ‘I just thought I should make it clear.’

‘I take due note.’ Amusement still gleamed. ‘The allure is more than sufficient as it stands, I assure you.’

Gazing at him, Karen knew a sudden devil-may-care surge. Luiz Andrade was like no other man she had ever met—like none she was ever likely to meet again. Practised in the art of seduction for certain, yet she somehow trusted him.

‘Shall I need to change?’ she asked. ‘For the drive, I mean.’

Viewing the sleeveless lemon top outlining firm breasts, he shook his head. ‘You’re perfect just as you are.’

Karen had enjoyed seeing Rio on her own, but not nearly as much as with Luiz for a guide. She found herself telling him just about her whole life story, and hearing many details of his.

After completing the business that had brought him to Rio, he had decided to take a few days to himself before returning home, moving into the hotel that very morning. A man of some means, she gathered, reading between the lines. Wealthy enough to have little need of finding a rich woman to fleece, for certain.

‘You must have thought me very gauche to come out with an accusation like that,’ she said ruefully at one point.

‘I found your lack of conceit in suspecting money might have a bearing on my interest utterly delightful,’ Luiz returned. ‘You have no real concept of the effect you have on a man, have you?’ he added.

They were alone on the highest of the Corcovado platforms, immediately beneath the towering figure of Christ. Karen felt her throat dry as he slid a hand beneath her hair to tilt her face to his.

The kiss was gentle at first, almost playful, lips brushing, nibbling, teasing hers apart. She was lost to everything but the feel of him, the masculine scent of him, the warmth spiralling through her body.

The silky touch of his tongue sent a shudder rippling down her back, inciting a response she couldn’t, and didn’t want to, control. She slid her arms about his shoulders, fingers seeking the curl of hair at his nape. Somewhere in the back of her mind she regretted her lack of high heels to bring the lower half of her body into closer contact with his: a need fulfilled when he drew her up to him.

He was aroused himself, but still in control, the proof of that in his failure to take further advantage of her inflamed emotions. Karen came back to earth with a thud as he put her firmly from him.

‘Tonight we dance together,’ he murmured.

‘You’re taking a lot for granted again,’ she got out.

A wicked sparkle lit the dark eyes. ‘I speak of the Samba. In Rio, everyone dances the Samba!’

Karen had to smile. The Samba might come first, but she knew where the day was going to end—knew where she wanted it to end. What happened after that she couldn’t find the will to care.

It was already approaching eight o'clock when they returned to the hotel. Back in her luxurious room, she took a shower and donned a simple blue sheath of a dress for the evening, adorning it with the single strand of small cultured pearls that had been her mother's.

Falling from a central parting, her hair framed the pure oval of a face too familiar to her to be viewed with any overriding vanity. It appealed to Luiz. That was all that mattered. She only hoped she didn't disappoint him too much in other ways when the time came.

They ate dinner in one of the hotel restaurants, continuing on from there to a private club. Devastating in a white tuxedo, Luiz guided her through a whole selection of Latin American dances, creating havoc with a tango that had her moulded to his body like a second skin.

'If they could see me now!' she quipped breathlessly when the music stopped.

'If who could see you now?' Luiz asked, still holding her close.

'Friends back home. They'll never believe I did that!' She gave a laugh, eyes sparkling up at him. 'I can hardly believe it myself! It was so...'

'Sensual?' he supplied as she searched for the right word. 'It's meant to be. The prelude to lovemaking.' His voice was low, his gaze intent on her face, his expression leaving nothing to doubt. 'I want to make love to you. I ache for it!'

'Me too,' she whispered, abandoning what little emotional control she had left.

He kissed her then, ignoring the others on the floor. Karen returned it without reserve. She knew no embarrassment on feeling knowing eyes on them as he led her from the floor. So what if people did guess where they were heading? It happened the world over.

It was almost one o'clock when they reached the hotel. By silent consent they went to her room. Karen knew a momentary misgiving as Luiz quietly closed the door, but it vanished as he took her in his arms to kiss her with overriding passion.

He undressed her with dexterity, caressing each freshly exposed portion of her body. Her breasts filled his palms, nipples small and pink. She cried out at the exquisite sensation when he took them between his lips.

Stripped himself, he was everything she had imagined: skin taut over smoothly honed muscle, chest lightly covered in curling black hair, hips lean and hard, the proud manhood shortening her breath. She wished desperately that she was experienced in lovemaking, knowledgeable in the sexual arts.

'Is it possible that this is your first time with a man?' he asked softly, sensing the constraint in her.

'Yes,' she confessed. 'I'm sorry to disappoint you.'

'Disappoint me!' He added something in his own language, eyes charged with those sparkling amber lights. 'That you could never do. Surrender yourself to me! Let me show you the way!'

From that moment time dissolved. All she knew was sensation after rippling sensation as Luiz introduced her to erogenous zones she hadn't even known her body possessed. Reticence withered and died beneath the skilful caresses, a sensuality she had never dared acknowledge before prompting her to answer in kind. Exploring him as he was exploring her, to fetch the breath hissing through his teeth and glory in the power.

When the moment came, she was so aroused she felt barely any pain at all as he carved a passage to the molten centre of her body. The feel of him inside her went beyond anything she had ever imagined, filling her, claiming her. She almost passed out at the peak, body arching as spasm after spasm shook her.

Supporting himself on bent elbows, Luiz looked down into her drowned face with gratification.

‘You belong to me now,’ he said. ‘For all time! I’ll allow no other man to know you. We’ll be married as soon as it can be arranged.’ He smiled as her eyes flew open in shock. ‘You must know what I feel for you. What you feel for me. There can be no other way.’

‘I’m only here for two weeks,’ she whispered, unable to believe he really meant it. ‘My home is in England.’

‘You have no family to draw you back there.’

‘I have friends.’

‘And they mean more to you than what exists between us?’

‘This is just...physical,’ she got out. ‘I’m sure you’ve felt the same way over other women.’

Dark eyes blazed in repudiation. ‘Never! Neither can you have ever felt this way for another man, or you would have already given yourself.’

He put his lips to hers again, robbing her of the ability to think straight—even to think at all. His tongue slid silkily into the softness, making her quiver as passion rose in her once more.

‘You see,’ he murmured when the world had stopped spinning again. ‘We belong together. Can you deny the strength of our feelings?’

Karen couldn’t, and had no desire to. What kind of fool would she be, she asked herself, to turn her back on the only man she’d ever met who could make her feel this way? A man who wanted far more than just her body. What did she really have back home to return to? Friends might miss her for a while, but they had lives of their own to get on with.

Luiz read the response in her eyes, his own registering a depth of emotion that shook her to the core. She drew him down to her to kiss him with tremulous intensity, closing out the reservations nibbling at the corners of her mind.

There were moments during the days following when those reservations surfaced again, but one look at Luiz was enough to push them back under. He was so much the macho male. She felt protected, cared about—all the things she’d missed so much these past four years since her parents had gone.

The phone call home to tell her flatmate she wouldn’t be returning was received with initial disbelief. How could she possibly marry a man she’d known such a short time, and a foreigner at that? Julie demanded. What about her job, her belongings, her whole life?

Apart from certain mementos, nothing was important compared with Luiz, Karen told her, refusing to acknowledge even the faintest doubt.

If Luiz entertained any doubts of his own, he gave no sign of it. They spent the days doing all the things Karen had planned to do: visiting the sights, lounging on the famous beaches, swimming in the warm blue sea. At night they made love, each time better than the last. For Karen it was a dream world where nothing could intrude. She floated on air.

The wedding, a civil ceremony, took place just a week after her arrival in Rio. There would be a church blessing when they were home in São Paulo, Luiz had promised.

He wanted it this way, he said when she asked why they didn’t wait until they got to São Paulo to get married, which made her suspect him of presenting a probably disapproving family with a *fait accompli*. Not that she allowed the suspicion to affect her. She was marrying the man, not the family.

Only on completing the formalities did it strike home that she’d really and truly burned her boats. Karen Downing was no more. In her place stood Senhora Andrade, wife of a man still a stranger in many

ways.

‘Do your brother and sister know about the wedding yet?’ she asked that night after their tumultuous lovemaking.

‘They do,’ Luiz confirmed.

‘But they didn’t want to be here for it?’

‘Regina wanted to come,’ he admitted, ‘but I forbade her to travel alone.’

‘And your brother?’ she said after a moment.

There was a brief pause before he answered, his tone dispassionate. ‘Raymundo allows himself to be ruled by his wife’s opinions.’

Karen kept her tone light. ‘Something you’d never do!’

‘Ruled, no,’ he agreed. ‘Beatriz might form some respect for her husband if he began making his own decisions.’

‘I take it, then, that your sister-in-law is the fly in the ointment,’ she said.

His laugh was dry. ‘If that means she is the one least likely to offer you a welcome, then yes. Not that you must allow her to undermine your position. You will be head of the household.’

‘Under you, of course,’ she murmured in mock humility.

He rolled on to his back to pull her on top of him, eyes glinting up at her as he fitted her to him. ‘Not always,’ he said.

Karen gave herself over to the exquisite sensations, loving his mastery. No regrets, was her last fading thought.

She would have preferred a little more time with Luiz on his own, but he didn’t give her the option. They travelled to São Paulo the following day.

After the heat and humidity of Rio, the drier, milder climate of the São Paulo plateau was a wonderful relief.

‘Happy?’ Luiz asked as they drove away from the airport in the car he’d left there on his departure.

‘Blissfully!’ she said. She hesitated before adding, ‘I’ll be even happier once I’ve got the meeting with your family over.’

‘They’ll love you,’ he declared. The glance he turned her way was heart-warming. ‘They can do no other!’

‘You’re biased,’ she teased.

Luiz looked her way again, eyes skimming her glowing, sun-bronzed face, the silver fall of her hair, the smooth line of her throat revealed by the open collar of her cream silk shirt.

‘I adore you,’ he said. ‘Every inch of you!’ The wicked sparkle danced in his eyes. ‘And I *know* every inch of you!’

She could verify that, Karen thought, senses fired by the mere memory of last night’s excesses. She had believed they’d already reached the pinnacle, but he’d proved her wrong. She watched his hands on the wheel, lean and long fingered, the nails trimmed short and smoothly filed, wrists supple. Those hands alone had afforded her more pleasure than she had ever thought possible.

Tonight they would share a bed again, but first she had to contend with meeting her new relatives. From what Luiz had said, his sister-in-law was the only one unlikely to extend a welcome, but the marriage would have been a shock for them all. She could hardly blame Regina and Raymundo if they held back too.

Expecting more of a village than a town, she found La Santa enough of a surprise, but the house and landscaped grounds took her breath away. Knowing Luiz was no pauper was one thing, realising that the ranch probably formed only a part of his assets quite another. She was married to a man of means way beyond her imaginings.

Regina greeted her with open arms, her lovely young face lit with pleasure and excitement.

‘Luiz said you were beautiful,’ she exclaimed, ‘but never have I seen hair the colour of yours before!’

‘Inherited from my mother,’ Karen told her, warmed beyond measure by the reception. ‘I always wanted a sister. Now I have one!’

‘And a brother,’ said Raymundo, coming forward to kiss her on both cheeks. ‘Welcome to Guavada!’

He seemed genuine too, Karen thought, smiling back at him. Odd that someone who looked so much like Luiz could leave her totally unstirred.

The woman at his back made no attempt to offer an embrace. Her striking features were expressionless.

She said something in Portuguese, drawing a frown from Luiz.

‘Karen has no knowledge of the language yet,’ he said. ‘We’ll all of us speak English alone in her company for the present.’

‘I want to learn the language,’ Karen protested.

‘Which you will,’ he said. ‘In time.’ His smile was for her and her alone. ‘We have a lifetime ahead of us.’

A lifetime in a country she knew next to nothing about, with a man she knew little more about, came the thought, pushed hastily to the back of her mind where it could do least harm.

Her spirits lifted again in the privacy of the bedroom when Luiz took her in his arms to welcome her home his own way. *This* was what counted the most, she told herself.

She clung to that thought during those first days. Adjusting to a lifestyle totally different from what she was accustomed to proved far from easy. She suffered badly from homesickness at times.

With a manager to oversee the day-to-day running of the ranch, Luiz hardly needed to be involved in any physical sense himself, but he was often out riding the range with the men—even turning his hand to manual labour on occasion.

‘I enjoy it,’ he said simply when Karen questioned the necessity. ‘It fulfils me. A different kind of fulfilment,’ he added, seeing the expression in her eyes. ‘Not to be compared.’

‘I should hope not,’ she said, doing her best to be rational about it.

He laughed, gathering her to him to kiss her with undiminished ardour. ‘As if anything could possibly compare with the pleasure you give me!’

Maybe not in the same way, came the thought, but she was still only a part of his life.

He had been the focus of hers back in Rio, blinding her to everything else. Here at Guavada, she was beginning to realise the enormity of the step she had taken. Abandoning the country of her birth to live a life

totally alien to her with a man she barely knew had been utterly crazy.

Not that the emotions he aroused in her were any less intense. He only had to turn those glittering dark eyes on her to have her on fire. In his arms it was easy to convince herself that just being with him made everything worthwhile. As a lover, he was all she could ever have wished for.

A draw though his masculine assertiveness had proved in the beginning, and still was to a degree, there were times when she found it just a little overpowering too. Accepting his offer to teach her to drive instead of opting for proper lessons proved a less than sensible move.

‘I read somewhere that driving lessons can spell death to a marriage,’ she remarked on one occasion, trying to inject a little humour into a particularly heated exchange.

‘Call me what you just called me one more time, and it’s certainly death to this!’ Luiz threatened, obviously not in the least amused. ‘I’m not one of your English wimps!’

And I’m not one of your Brazilian doormats, it was on the tip of her tongue to retort. She bit it back because she’d not only yet to meet a woman here who could be termed a doormat in any sense, but had to admit that he had some cause for complaint over the invective she’d used just now.

‘I just lost my temper for a moment,’ she said placatingly.

‘Then you had better learn to keep it,’ he responded, the anger still glittering in his eyes.

Humour came to her rescue again, lowering her eyes in mock humility. ‘I beg forgiveness,’ she said.

There was no immediate response. She peeped at him from beneath her lashes, to see his mouth take on a somewhat unwilling curve.

‘You,’ he said, ‘have no respect. I must teach you some.’

They were parked in the centre of town, with people thronging the pavements either side. Karen widened her eyes at him. ‘Here?’

‘Later,’ he promised, unable to sustain his displeasure in the face of the emerald sparkle. ‘We’ll continue with *this* lesson for now.’

Lesson number one in handling her Brazilian, Karen reflected drily, putting the car into motion again: always make allowances for dented male pride, even if it did go against the grain.

Her relationship with Regina progressed by leaps and bounds. At seventeen, her sister-in-law was a romantic who found her brother’s marriage in total accord with the novels she read so avidly. The heroes and heroines always finished up living happily ever after, Karen gleaned. She hoped that could be true of her and Luiz too eventually.

Attempts to get through the barriers Beatriz had erected against her met with little success. The woman treated her with open contempt when Luiz wasn’t around.

‘Does Raymundo have no assets of his own?’ she asked Regina once.

‘Of course he does,’ the girl responded. ‘He was left well provided for. He loves Guavada too much to make his home elsewhere.’ She slanted a glance. ‘Luiz would make him go if you asked it.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it,’ Karen denied.

‘Not even to have Beatriz gone too?’

Karen gave a wry smile. ‘A temptation, I admit. Why does she hate me so much?’

‘Can you not guess? She would have liked to marry Luiz herself. She took advantage of Raymundo’s feelings for her to secure at least the name. Deep down, he has to know it, but she still has him in her grip.’

If that was true, and not just the product of Regina’s fertile imagination, it would certainly explain a lot, Karen reflected. If it *was* true, she could feel some sympathy for Raymundo. He might be weak, but he deserved better than to be used.

With that in mind, she went out of her way to be nice to him. Away from Beatriz, he was a different person, with a sense of humour Karen delighted in drawing out.

‘You and Beatriz don’t really seem to have all that much in common,’ she commented lightly one time when the two of them were on their own.

‘No,’ he agreed on a wry note. ‘I can never be everything Beatriz desires.’

‘You’re happy to accept that?’ Karen queried tentatively after a moment.

‘I have no choice,’ he said. ‘Luiz would never sanction divorce.’

It isn’t up to Luiz, Karen wanted to say, but she held it back. ‘You must have loved her when you married her,’ she ventured.

‘I was possessed by my craving,’ he admitted. ‘I knew even then that it was Luiz she really wanted, but I believed I could satisfy her. It...’ He broke off, expression rueful. ‘I shouldn’t be saying such things to you.’

‘You obviously need to let it out to someone,’ she said. ‘Does Luiz know how you feel?’

‘No.’ Raymundo looked alarmed. ‘You must say nothing to him!’

‘I won’t,’ she assured him. ‘But you should.’

‘To what purpose?’ he asked. ‘I know what his answer would be.’

‘That you’ve made your bed and must lie on it?’

A faint smile flickered at the corners of her brother-in-law’s lips. ‘Perhaps not in quite the same words, but the message would be the same.’

‘It’s *your* life, not his!’ Karen was incensed. ‘He has no right to tell you what you can or can’t do!’

‘He has the right to insist that I leave Guavada,’ came the reply. ‘And that I would hate.’

He closed up after that, obviously regretting having confided in her to such a degree. Karen felt both sorry for and impatient with him. Luiz may be a bit of an autocrat in some respects, but she doubted if he’d react the way Raymundo feared, regardless of his views.

Although La Santa wasn’t lacking in entertainment, their social life tended to be centred more around friends and neighbours. While most appeared friendly enough on the surface, it was apparent that the marriage was looked upon with disfavour by some. Not everyone in the area spoke English, which didn’t help. With her grasp of Portuguese still in its infancy, Karen was only too happy to find someone other than the Andrades themselves to converse with at one of the frequent gatherings.

Jorge Arroyo was a man of independent means, from what she could gather. He had a studio in La Santa where he dabbled in the arts, to put it in his own words. Some two or three years younger than Luiz, he had an appealingly free and easy attitude to life.

‘Luiz’s return with a bride ruined many hopes,’ he said. ‘He could have taken his choice from those still unwed. Not that any could have matched you. I yearn to capture you myself! On canvas, of course,’ he added with a devilish sparkle in his eyes.

‘Of course,’ Karen echoed, smiling herself. ‘What does one of your portraits cost?’

‘There would be no sale,’ he said. ‘I would keep it for my eyes alone.’

‘I don’t somehow think Luiz would go along with that,’ she responded, still in the same light vein.

He gave a mock sigh. ‘I think you may be right. Luiz has little appreciation of my talents. He won’t like it that you speak with me.’

Green eyes acquired a sudden spark. ‘It’s up to me to decide who I talk to!’

‘Then I look forward to many other conversations,’ he said.

He was stirring it, she thought, catching the devilish look in his eyes again as he turned away to answer some question put to him by one of the other men. Whatever his reason, she shouldn’t have allowed him to provoke her.

Luiz was with a group of people a short distance away. She went to join him, slipping her hand into his, and aiming a general smile at the others. They would have been conversing in Portuguese of course, she realised, as the pause stretched.

‘Do carry on,’ she invited, determined not to show any discomposure. ‘It’s the only way I’m going to learn the language.’

‘It would help you to take proper tuition,’ said one of the women, not unkindly.

‘I suppose it would,’ Karen agreed. ‘What do you think, Luiz?’

‘It could do no harm,’ he returned.

Karen looked at him swiftly, registering a certain terseness in his voice. It was possible that Jorge was right, she thought, noting the tension in his jaw: he’d seen her talking with the man, and hadn’t liked it. If so, it was unfortunate. She might regret what she’d said to Jorge, but she stood by the sentiment.

Luiz waited until they were home and in the privacy of the bedroom before confirming her guess. ‘You’ll avoid any further association with Jorge Arroyo,’ he said flatly the moment the door was closed.

Half prepared though she was, Karen bristled instinctively at the tone. ‘Why?’ she demanded.

‘It should be enough that I say so.’

‘Well, I’m afraid it isn’t. All I was doing was talking with the man!’

The glance he gave her was lacking its usual warmth. ‘You were not just talking with him, you were flirting with him.’

‘*He* was flirting,’ she retorted.

‘With your encouragement.’ Luiz held up a hand as she made to speak. ‘I want no debate.’

‘Don’t treat me like some second rate citizen!’ she flung back. ‘Where I come from, we have equality!’

He lifted a sardonic eyebrow. ‘Where you come from, men have given up their right to be called men. I expect my wife to do as I ask.’

‘You’re not asking me,’ she shot back, ‘you’re *telling* me!’

‘So, I’m telling you.’ He hadn’t even raised his voice. ‘You’re to stay away from Jorge Arroyo.’

He turned away to head for the bathroom, leaving her seething.

She was in bed with her back turned to the centre when he returned to the room. He always slept in the nude, and she'd learned to do so too. Donning a nightdress was a gesture meant to convey her rejection.

He slid into the bed behind her without speaking. Furious though she still was, mind had little control over matter she found as his hand slid around her to seek her breast.

'Leave me alone!' she said between her teeth. 'I don't want you!'

If he'd been angry with her a few minutes ago, it obviously no longer reckoned with him. The feather-light pressure of his lips down her spine made her tingle.

'I think you lie to me,' he said softly.

She attempted to stay the movement down the length of her body to the hem of the nightdress, but he simply laughed and continued, sliding up beneath the material to find the moist centre of her being.

'Other men may desire you, but no other will ever know you this way,' he declared. 'You belong to me, and only to me!'

Body on fire, she could summon no further resistance when he drew her around to remove the gown. His lips were passionate, driving every extraneous thought from mind.

It was only afterwards, lying sleepless in his arms, that she gave way to the little voice that had been nibbling at the corners of her mind for some time. Luiz didn't love her. Not the way she'd imagined he did. She was just another possession.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ATTENDED by family and close friends, the blessing of the marriage took place at the town's magnificent church. The civil ceremony had been binding in the legal sense, but this one tied an even tighter knot. Not that she had anything to complain about, Karen acknowledged. With a wonderful home, no financial worries, and a sex-life most women would give their right arm for, she could be said to be in clover.

Confirmation of her pregnancy brought mixed emotions. It had been odds on that it would happen, of course, as no steps had been taken to stop it, but she somehow hadn't given it a thought up to now.

Luiz greeted the news with gratification. 'This won't be our only child!' he declared.

'I wouldn't want it to be.' Karen made an effort to sound as uplifted as he so obviously was. 'If this one is a boy, I'd hope the next one would be a girl.'

He laughed and shook his head. 'Two sons first. *Then* you may have a daughter.'

'I realise you're pretty strong-minded,' she returned with a slight edge, 'but some things even you can't govern!'

Luiz smiled the slow intimate smile that never failed to stir her. 'I can but try.'

Regina was delighted about the baby too, though also a little despondent.

'I think I'm destined never to meet a man I can love!' she declared soulfully.

'You're only seventeen,' Karen returned. 'You've plenty of time. Someone will come along one day and sweep you off your feet!'

'The way Luiz did with you! How did you know he was the one?' the younger girl insisted. 'What made him different from other men?'

Karen sought a light response. 'He's Brazilian.'

Her sister-in-law pulled a face. 'Now you joke with me!'

'Only a little.' Karen kept the smile going. 'I suppose it was his looks, his manner, the things he said.'

'What kind of things?'

'You'll find out for yourself one day.'

Regina laughed. 'I look forward to it! I look forward to the baby too,' she added with renewed enthusiasm. 'Shall you choose English names?'

'I doubt if your brother would go along with that.'

It was more than likely true, Karen reflected. She was married to a Brazilian, the child would be a Brazilian. Luiz had already suggested that she apply for citizenship herself, but she had dismissed *that* idea out of hand. The last thing she intended giving up was her nationality.

He'd accepted the refusal with good grace, she had to admit. But then, that was one thing he couldn't lay down the law about.

Reluctant though she'd been to give way to his demand, she'd steered clear of any further one-to-one encounters with Jorge Arroyo, though it proved impossible to avoid him altogether.

'I believed you had more spirit,' he said sadly when they came face to face in La Santa one morning.

'It's called diplomacy,' she defended, seeing no point in pretending not to know what he was talking about.

'It's called submission,' he countered. 'If you have any independence left at all, you will take coffee with me.'

About to refuse, Karen knew a sudden insurgence. He was right: it was time she showed Luiz she had a mind of her own still.

'All right,' she said.

Jorge gave an approving smile. 'That's better.'

The café he took her to was already well-populated. Karen recognised one or two familiar faces, and knew word would get back to Luiz, but she refused to let it concern her.

'What is it that Luiz has against you, anyway?' she asked when they were seated.

Jorge gave a rueful shrug. 'Regina became attracted to me last year. He believes I encouraged her.'

'And did you?'

He put on a hurt expression. 'I wanted only to paint her. The rest was in her mind only.'

'Tell me about it,' Karen invited.

'There is little to tell,' he said. 'She came to my studio just the three times. I had no notion of her feelings for me until she declared herself. It was difficult to know what to do. I'm not accustomed to dealing with the emotions of teenage girls. Luiz made her tell him what was making her so unhappy. He threatened to kill me.'

'People say all sorts of things under pressure,' Karen responded, trying to view the situation impartially. 'I gather he didn't know about the painting?'

'I hadn't realised that Regina had kept it a secret,' Jorge defended.

Karen studied him for a lengthy moment, uncertain whether to believe him or not. Sixteen was an impressionable age, she had to admit: she'd developed a crush on one of her teachers herself back then.

'I suppose all's well that ends well,' she said at last. 'Regina obviously recovered, and you're still here to tell the tale.'

'It's no tale,' he insisted. 'She held no appeal for me other than as a subject. Perhaps I should have sought Luiz's approval before asking her to sit for me, but I gave it no thought.'

'Whether or not, I think there's enough bad blood between you and Luiz without adding to it,' she said. 'I shouldn't have agreed to this.'

Jorge looked at her scornfully. 'I have no fear of him, but you must do as you see fit, of course.'

It wasn't fear that prompted her, Karen could have told him. She'd accepted the challenge in a belated gesture of defiance against Luiz's dictate, but if he believed Regina had been encouraged by the man, she

could understand the objection. If he'd told her why at the time, she would have accepted it.

Only that wasn't Luiz's way, was it? Why should he bother explaining anything?

She could feel eyes following her as she left the café. People who knew both Luiz and Jorge would be aware of the rift between them, even if they didn't know the reason for it. Her being here with the latter had to give rise to speculation.

Regina greeted her reproachfully when she got back to the house.

'I would have come to town with you if I'd known you planned a trip,' she said.

'If you'd been here when I decided, I'd have asked you,' Karen returned mildly. 'Where did you get to?'

'I was helping Carlos change a wheel on the Mercedes,' she said. 'I may have need of such knowledge when I have my own licence next year.'

'Nothing to do with Carlos being such a hunk, of course,' Karen teased.

About to launch an indignant denial, Regina caught her eye and settled for a grin instead.

'He is, isn't he? You won't tell Luiz? He'd get rid of him if he thought I was becoming enamoured.' She sounded suddenly wry. 'I did something very stupid last year, and allowed myself to be dazzled by a man many years older than me. It was fortunate that Luiz found out and put a stop to it, before it became any more than an infatuation on my part.'

It was so strange, Karen thought, that Regina should choose to tell her all this on the same day she'd heard it from Jorge. From the way she *had* told it, it seemed he'd probably been lying through his teeth.

The only way to be sure was to question her further, and the other looked as if she might already be regretting the confidence.

'We've all of us done stupid things at times,' she said comfortingly. 'The best thing is to put it out of mind.'

'It would be easier to do that if I no longer saw him at all.' Regina made an effort to lift her spirits again. 'Have you felt the baby kick yet?'

Karen had to laugh. 'It's far too early for that.'

'But you will let me know the instant it happens?'

'Providing it's not in the middle of the night.' She waited until she was safely in the bedroom before giving way to the impulse that had almost overtaken her downstairs, splaying her fingers across an abdomen still flat and taut. She would be twelve weeks gone or more before there were any really noticeable signs, the gynaecologist had told her. It was barely seven weeks yet, so the stirring she felt had to be in her imagination.

Luiz was turned on by the way she looked now: body slender and supple, breasts high and firm. Would he feel the same way when all that changed?

She whipped her hands away as the door opened. Luiz gazed across at her with quizzically lifted brows.

'You look startled,' he said.

'I was miles away,' she prevaricated. 'I didn't realise you were home.'

'I've been at work in the office for the past two hours. Regina said you'd returned.' He paused, in obvious expectation of some response, gaze sharpening when she failed to make it. 'Is something wrong?'

‘You’d better hear it from me before you hear it from someone else,’ she said. ‘I had coffee with Jorge Arroyo this morning.’

The muscles about the strong mouth tautened ominously. ‘I told you—’

‘I know what you told me.’ Karen kept her tone even. ‘I also know *why* you don’t want me associating with him. If you’d told me about Regina to start with, I’d have understood.’

Luiz closed the door, face expressionless now. ‘I saw no reason to explain my motives.’

‘In other words, it should have been enough just to say it.’ Karen drew a deep breath, battenning down her temper. ‘Well, it wasn’t.’

‘Apparently.’ He was angry, but in control of it, the only indication in the slight pinching of his nostrils. ‘As I’d doubt that Jorge would have told you about it himself, I gather Regina did.’

‘Yes. Although Jorge had already...’ Karen broke off, biting her lip.

Luiz gave her a humourless smile. ‘Had already claimed to be the innocent victim of a young girl’s infatuation, is that what you were about to say?’

‘More or less,’ she admitted. ‘Not that I believed him.’

‘That’s *something* to be grateful for.’

‘There’s no need for sarcasm,’ she flashed. ‘I’m trying to be straight with you. I don’t have the slightest interest in Jorge Arroyo!’

‘You had coffee with him simply to prove a point?’

‘Yes.’ She lifted her chin. ‘Stupid, I know.’

He surveyed her, lean features relaxing. ‘Misguided, perhaps.’

Karen made no move as he came over to her. He took her face between his hands, the way he so often did, tracing the curve of her lips with the ball of his thumb, eyes searching hers. ‘No regrets?’

‘No regrets,’ she echoed.

It was far from the truth. She regretted so many things: winning the money that had brought her here to Brazil in the first place; allowing herself to be overcome by lust; marrying a man she’d known just a few days on the strength of that lust. Because that was all it had ever really been for her, when it came right down to it. She’d been caught up in a fantasy of her own making.

‘What is it?’ There was a line drawn between the dark brows.

Karen shook herself. Regretted or not, the marriage was a fact. Even if Luiz had been willing to have it dissolved before, he certainly wasn’t going to do it now, with the baby on the way.

‘I’m feeling a bit homesick, that’s all,’ she said.

‘*This* is your home!’ he declared. ‘If you return to England at all, it will only be to visit.’

And not for a long time, she thought, reading between the lines.

His kiss drew its usual response from her. That at least hadn’t altered. Hopefully it never would.

Luiz’s announcement the week before Christmas that they were to visit his mother in Brasilia came as something of a surprise.

‘I rather gathered the impression that you were estranged,’ Karen said.

‘We were for a time,’ he admitted. ‘She remarried too soon after my father’s death for propriety.’

‘But you’ve forgiven her?’

The shrug was brief. ‘She’s my mother. What else could I do?’

‘What about her husband?’ Karen asked.

‘He’s a good enough man. He travels extensively on business, so we may not see him.’

‘Your mother does know about me though? I mean, that I’m not Brazilian?’

‘She knows.’

They left for Brasilia the following day. It was the first time in several weeks that Karen had been further than a few miles from the ranch.

Driving to the airport, she thought about the journey out when she was still on cloud nine, convinced that she’d found the love of her life. In the physical sense, she probably had, but no matter how fantastic, sex wasn’t the be all and end all of a relationship. If she’d never met Luiz she would be waking up in the London flat right about now, with Julie just the other side of the wall and a familiar routine ahead.

‘You’re very quiet,’ Luiz commented, slanting a glance. ‘Are you feeling ill?’

Karen seized on the excuse. ‘Just a little.’

‘Do you wish me to stop the car?’

She shook her head. ‘It will pass.’

‘Perhaps I should have waited a little longer before making this arrangement,’ he said after a moment. ‘We can turn back now, if you wish.’

Not looking forward to the coming meeting, she was tempted, but it was best to get it over and done with, she supposed.

‘We can’t mess your mother around at the last minute,’ she said. ‘Anyway, it’s going off already.’

Luiz winged a smile. ‘Women are very resilient.’

Karen suffered a guilty pang. So far she had yet to undergo morning, or any other time of day, sickness. ‘We have to be to put up with you men,’ she returned, adopting a flippant note.

He laughed. ‘Such martyrdom!’

She studied him from the corner of her eye, stirred as always by the sheer masculine impact. She knew his body the way he knew hers, but that was all she really knew of him. It was probably all she would ever really know of him.

‘Isn’t it though?’ she said.

His glance was sharper this time, though he made no comment. Karen could almost hear him putting the brittleness he’d obviously caught in her voice down to her condition. Some of it perhaps was. She felt trapped.

Spread over several square miles, Brasilia was almost surrounded by a vast artificial lake. Luiz’s mother lived in a sector of residential dwellings built along the southern end of the lake. The house was set within spacious, landscaped grounds. Long and low, it looked far too large for two people.

The gates were electrified. Luiz spoke briefly into a box set in the side wall, driving through as they opened to bring the hired car to a stop on the wide, stone-laid circle fronting the house.

‘What did you say your stepfather does for a living?’ Karen asked.

‘I didn’t say,’ Luiz answered. ‘He’s a cabinet minister, dealing with foreign affairs. Mother met him when she came to Brasilia to visit with friends some weeks after my father’s death. They were married within the month.’

‘Like mother, like son,’ Karen thought, only realising she had actually murmured the words out loud when Luiz stopped in the act of getting from the car to give her a suddenly hardened look.

‘There’s no comparison!’

‘I know.’ She made a contrite gesture. ‘Our circumstances were completely different.’

The dark eyes failed to soften. ‘I’m glad you realise it.’

A man dressed in the dark trousers and white shirt that signified serving staff came from the house. Luiz slid from his seat to answer the respectful greeting, coming round to assist Karen from her place as the man opened the boot to extract their bags.

Karen restrained the urge to say she wasn’t yet far enough along to need assistance. Her emotions regarding the baby were still in a state of flux, one minute anticipatory, the next downbeat. Hormones, she supposed.

The house inside was built to the American open plan, with coolly tiled floors winging away in all directions. The furnishings were a little over-elaborate for Karen’s tastes, but obviously no expense had been spared. Beyond the sliding glass doors fronting the vast living area could be seen a broad covered lanai, and beyond that a free-form swimming pool complete with waterfall.

Cristina Belsamo rose from a brocade chair. Considering Luiz’s age, she had to be in her fifties, yet she looked no more than the mid-forties. She was both beautiful and elegant in her designer dress of cream silk, her luxuriant dark hair piled high, but the smile on her lips was not reflected in her eyes.

She greeted her son in Portuguese, switching to a somewhat formalised English to address Karen herself.

‘You are very lovely, but I would have expected no less. You must be weary from the journey. You would no doubt like to rest before dinner.’

It was more of a command than a suggestion, Karen thought. Not much of a welcome anyway. It was on the tip of her tongue to say she’d much prefer to take a swim, but she bit it back. She hadn’t a suit with her, in any case, and this was no place to go skinny-dipping.

‘That’s very considerate of you,’ she said instead.

‘You have the blue suite,’ Cristina told Luiz, adding something in Portuguese too fast for Karen to even take a guess at translation.

He made no answer in either language, simply indicating that Karen should accompany him. His expression was unrevealing, though she sensed something simmering beneath the surface.

The guest suites lay down a side corridor. Three of them, counting the doors beyond the one Luiz opened. Blue was certainly the colour: carpet, drapes, bedspreads, all toning shades against off-white walls. Twin beds, Karen noted: Cristina’s way of expressing her feelings about the marriage, perhaps. She at least had married another Brazilian, not a foreigner.

Their bags had already been deposited on stands at the foot of each bed. Had they not been locked, Karen suspected they would have been unpacked too by now.

‘Leave that,’ Luiz said as she made a move towards her own bag. ‘You need to rest.’

‘I’m not in the least tired,’ she retorted. ‘Will you please stop treating me like an invalid?’

‘I have no intention of treating you like an invalid,’ he denied levelly. ‘Now, or at any other time. You must naturally do as you feel able.’

Karen caught herself up, already regretting the tartness. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘That was uncalled for. I just...’ She broke off, spreading her hands in a helpless gesture. ‘Maybe I am tired.’

His expression relaxed a little. Coming forward, he tilted her chin with a finger to receive his kiss.

‘I’ll be with you shortly,’ he said. ‘My mother wishes to speak with me.’

To express her disapproval face to face, no doubt, Karen reflected. Not that there was anything the woman could do about it.

She unpacked both bags while Luiz was gone. With no clear idea of how long they would be staying, or what they might be doing, she had allowed for all eventualities. If Edigar Balsamo was away, it was unlikely that Cristina would be entertaining friends. That would be a relief in itself. Dealing with her attitude was going to be bad enough. Facing others of the same viewpoint she could do without.

The sun went down in a blaze of glory, backlighting the clouds spreading out from the horizon. Beyond the pool and outlying grounds lay an uninterrupted view of the lake’s southern reaches. Cabinet Ministers must be pretty well-paid to afford a place like this, Karen reflected. Of the two, she much preferred Guavada.

Luiz looked distinctly rattled when he eventually returned. Karen forbore from asking the obvious question. Assuming that dinner would be at the same time as Guavada, there were still a couple of hours to go. She knew one sure way of passing the time pleasantly for them both.

A smile overcame the tension about the strong mouth as he read the message in her eyes.

‘You,’ he said, ‘are a rare woman!’

‘For an Englishwoman, you mean?’ she murmured as he drew her to him and heard his low laugh.

‘For any nationality!’

The lovemaking was incredible as always. Luiz never rushed things, nor allowed her to do so. As always, when she was in his arms, she wanted to be nowhere else. When she was in his arms, the whole world could go to hell for all she cared. In his arms, she had no inhibitions: teasing him with caresses that drew him to the very brink; offering herself to him with wanton abandonment when he in turn aroused her to fever pitch.

‘I heard that pregnancy can turn a woman against sex in the initial stages,’ he murmured when they lay entwined after a climax that robbed them of just about every ounce of energy. ‘I can only be thankful for my good fortune.’

He lifted his head to look into her eyes, the amber lights deep in the darkness of his drawing her in. ‘You fulfil my every desire!’

At this moment perhaps, she thought. ‘And you mine,’ she murmured back, because it was expected of her. ‘You’re a lover without equal!’

His smile was brief. ‘You have no comparison. Nor will you while I draw breath,’ he added on a suddenly fiercer note. ‘You’re mine, and mine alone!’

Possession, not love, came the fading thought as he claimed her once more.

They were in Brasilia just three days in total. Three days that seemed more like three months. Cristina was courteous, but no more than that. Nor was she likely to soften, Karen judged. In her view, Luiz had betrayed his race by marrying out of it.

A handsome man in his early sixties, Edigar Belsamo put in a brief appearance that first evening. Although he made an effort to extend a welcome, he obviously found the situation difficult. Karen was unsurprised when he announced that he had to leave again the following morning. She only wished she could do the same.

Luiz spent the whole of the next day showing her round the capital with its ultra modern plazas and buildings. Karen would have preferred to explore on foot, but with temperatures in the lower eighties and little shade, few people walked anywhere.

‘I’d hate to live here,’ she said over lunch at one of the city’s top hotels. ‘It’s so huge!’

‘So is London,’ Luiz returned, ‘but you lived there.’

Nostalgia swamped her for a moment, totally disregarding the times she’d wished she could swap city living for somewhere in the countryside. ‘It’s not the same,’ she said.

He regarded her quizzically. ‘Apart from the architecture, in what way is it different from any other city?’

‘It has soul. A history that goes back hundreds of years, not just a few decades! If you’d ever visited it, you’d know what I’m talking about.’

‘You must give me the guided tour.’

Karen gazed at him in silence for a moment, unable to decide whether he meant what he seemed to be implying, or was just making noises.

‘When?’ she asked, opting for the former.

His shrug was easy. ‘Perhaps in a year or so when the child is old enough to be left.’

If he had his way, she would probably be pregnant again by then, she reflected, recalling what he’d said about this not being their only child. Not that she had any quarrel with that. She’d have loved siblings of her own.

The best thing might be not to go back at all. What was the point? Her life was here now. Perhaps not quite as perfect as she had first envisioned, but hardly a bad one.

‘What are your thoughts?’ Luiz asked curiously, watching the play of expressions across her face.

‘I was wishing we were home,’ she said impulsively, surprising herself because it was the first time she had thought of Guavada in that light. ‘I’m sure your mother would have no objection if we leave tomorrow.’

Something flickered deep down in the dark eyes. ‘I have matters I must attend to tomorrow.’

He made no attempt to enlarge on that statement. Business matters, Karen supposed. The thought of spending the day alone with her mother-in-law was far from appealing.

Cristina had an engagement herself in the morning. Karen spent it out on the lanai with a book. Luiz hadn’t said how long his affairs might take. She hoped he’d be back before his mother returned.

He wasn’t. Cristina came in around one-thirty, and the two of them ate lunch together. Conversation was minimal, the atmosphere frigid. Karen could finally stand it no longer.

‘I realise you totally disapprove of me as a suitable wife for your son,’ she said, ‘but I’m *his* choice. Can’t you accept that?’

There was no softening of expression in the older woman's eyes. 'I will never accept it!' she stated. 'He did this to punish me!'

Karen looked at her in some bewilderment. 'Punish you?'

'For the insult I gave to his father's memory.'

'Oh, come on!' Karen could scarcely believe she was serious. 'He'd hardly go that far!'

'You think you know my son better than I do myself?' Cristina gave a short, humourless laugh. 'You have a lot to learn about him. He could have had his choice of bride from among those fit to bear the name. Why else, if it were not to hurt me, would he choose one he knew I could never approve?'

'He told me his father died some years ago,' Karen returned. 'Why would he wait this long to get back at you?'

The laugh came again. 'He had first to find someone who fulfilled his physical needs too.'

It could quite possibly be true, Karen thought, feeling a dull ache in the pit of her stomach. She already knew that Luiz didn't love her—at least, not what she called love. But then, she didn't love him either.

Yes, you do, whispered the small voice at the back of her mind. Stop hiding from it!

She swallowed thickly, searching for something—*anything*—to say to the woman.

'You're entitled to believe whatever you want to believe,' she got out. 'The fact remains, I'm Luiz's wife and I'm carrying his child. Your first grandchild.'

'You think so?' Cristina's expression registered derision. 'As I said, you have a lot to learn.'

Karen studied her uncertainly, grappling with the implications. 'What are you trying to tell me?'

For a moment the older woman seemed to hesitate, then she lifted her shoulders. 'You believe Luiz is conducting some business affairs today, but you are wrong. He is visiting his son.'

How long Karen just sat there she couldn't have said. Her mind was in turmoil. 'You're lying,' she whispered at length.

'Why would I lie about such a thing?' the other woman demanded. 'Do you think I am any more proud to have a bastard grandchild than I shall be to have one of mixed blood?'

'Why...' Karen cleared her throat and tried again. 'Why didn't he marry the mother?'

A shutter came down suddenly in her mother-in-law's eyes. 'She is not of our class. I refuse to discuss the matter further,' she added flatly. 'He does duty by the child, that is all you need to know.'

And what did he do for the mother? Karen wondered. She hurt as though she'd been kicked. She got to her feet, unsurprised by the shakiness in her limbs. 'I'm going to take a siesta.'

The expression that flitted across Cristina's face could have been shame, though Karen doubted it.

'If you are wise, you will say nothing to Luiz of this,' the woman said.

If she were wise, she wouldn't be in this position to start with, Karen could have answered. She didn't because the words would have stuck in her throat.

The bedroom was cool and dim, the window blinds slanted against the sun's rays. She lay down on her bed fully clothed, gazing blindly at the shadowed ceiling.

Her hand moved of its own accord to caress her abdomen. Not Luiz's first child after all: that honour belonged to a boy born the wrong side of the blanket through no fault of his own. Under English law, he would have the same claim as any legitimate issue, but this wasn't England.

Not of our class, Cristina had said of the mother. Marriageable she may not be in Luiz's eyes too, but she would certainly be good-looking. There was every chance that the two of them were in bed together right now.

The pain went deep. What she was going to do she couldn't begin to think—didn't want to think. It was all too much to cope with.

Emotionally drained, she finally fell asleep, waking with a jerk when Luiz came into the room.

'Are you feeling unwell?' he asked concernedly.

Karen made a valiant effort to pull herself together as memory came flooding in. 'Just tired,' she said. 'What time is it?'

'Ten minutes past five,' he answered, glancing at his watch. 'I'm sorry to have been away so long.'

The time to fling accusations was now, but the words wouldn't come. 'Busy day?' she said instead.

'Very,' he agreed. 'I've told my mother we'll be leaving in the morning.'

'Good.' She faked a yawn, unable to stand much more for the moment. 'Do you mind if I go back to sleep for a while?'

He came over to the bed, dropping to sit on the mattress edge to bend and put his lips to her temple. 'You look pale,' he observed. 'Are you sure there's nothing wrong?'

Another opportunity, but she couldn't bring herself to take it. She steeled herself when he ran the back of his fingers gently down her cheek. Even knowing what she knew made little difference to her responses. She wanted him the way she had always wanted him. No doubt he had the same effect on his mistress.

'I told you, I'm just tired,' she said, trying to keep a level tone.

He considered her for a moment, obviously not wholly deceived, then he patted her cheek again and got to his feet. 'Have all the rest you need, of course. I'll take a change of clothing to another room so that I don't disturb you.'

She watched through slitted lids as he gathered what he needed, letting out a pent-up breath on a long-drawn sigh when he went from the room. She should have faced him with what she had learned, she knew. She hadn't because deep down she didn't want to hear him admit it, didn't want to see the guilt in his eyes.

He would have counted on his mother keeping her own council, considering her feelings towards his illegitimate son. Cristina was unlikely to confess her betrayal, so why rock the boat? For the sake of the child growing inside her, if nothing else, she had to put the whole affair aside.

CHAPTER NINE

THE journey back to Guavada was passed for the most part in silence. His conversational overtures unproductive, Luiz ran out of patience in the end.

‘Do you find pregnancy such a toil that even words are too much of a burden?’ he asked in the car. ‘I accept—as I accepted last night—that there will be times now when you feel too physically tired for lovemaking, but you can surely summon the strength to talk!’

‘I didn’t think what you were saying just now called for any in-depth response,’ Karen retorted, drawing a narrowed glance.

‘I doubt if you were even listening to what I was saying just now. You’ve been in a strange mood all day, in fact.’

‘I’m a woman,’ she returned, trying to make light of it. ‘We’re a moody species. You men just have to learn to live with it, I’m afraid.’

‘Not this man,’ came the less than humorous reply. ‘If you have some grievance I prefer to hear it.’

The accusation trembled once more on her lips, but was held back by a stronger instinct. ‘What grievance could I possibly have?’ she said instead. ‘You give me everything a woman could want.’ She forced herself to reach out a hand to touch his thigh, to put a smile on her lips. ‘Sorry for being such a grump.’

The answering smile was somewhat restrained. ‘You’re forgiven. Just don’t let it happen too often.’

Karen kept a tight rein on the tart retort. If she let fly now it would all come out, and what good would it do in the end? She could demand that he give up all physical contact with the other woman and her child, but it was unlikely that he’d agree never to see his son again.

While it pained her to know that the baby she carried wasn’t his first-born, she could somehow stomach that more easily than the probability that he still had a relationship with the other woman. She’d turned from him last night because she couldn’t rid herself of the images. Images that still persisted, although what excuse she would use tonight she had no idea.

The sun was already setting when they reached Guavada. Regina greeted them with her customary enthusiasm. She’d so missed her companionship, she told Karen.

‘How did you find my mother?’ she asked when the two of them were alone for a few minutes.

Karen kept her tone as easy as she could. ‘I doubt if we’ll ever be great friends.’

‘I was afraid of that.’ Regina sounded rueful. ‘She had what she believed would be the ideal wife for Luiz already chosen years ago. There have been others too, but Luiz favoured none of them. You must not allow her rejection to hurt you. She would have been the same over anyone he’d chosen for himself.’

Perhaps not so much if he’d chosen one of his own countrywomen, Karen reflected. Right now, her mother-in-law’s feelings weren’t of importance to her. She had far more pressing matters on her mind.

Unable to cast those matters aside, she slipped out on to the veranda after dinner for a breath of fresh air. The night air was deliciously cool on her skin. Seated on the swing couch, she contemplated the moonlit

landscape. Guavada had grown on her, she had to admit that now. If it weren't for what she knew, she could even consider it home. If she truly didn't love Luiz, none of what she'd learned would hurt as much, she was sure. The question was, how did she cope with that hurt?

'I was speaking with Cristina earlier,' said Beatriz from the doorway. There was an odd note in her voice. 'She tells me you know about the boy.'

Karen didn't turn her head. 'So I know about the boy.'

The pause was lengthy, the atmosphere charged. 'Are you going to tell Luiz that you know?' Beatriz finally asked on the same odd note.

'I see no reason to.' Karen kept her tone level with an effort. 'It happened before we met.'

'You are very tolerant. More than I would be myself in such circumstances.' The other woman sounded almost sympathetic.

'We're very different people,' Karen returned, not trusting the sympathy for a moment. 'Concentrate on your own marriage, and leave me to deal with mine.'

'My marriage is secure in every way,' retorted her sister-in-law, dropping back into character. 'Yours is dependent on the way you look. Luiz is a man to whom a woman's looks are all important. Should she lose them, he would have little interest left.'

She was telling her nothing she didn't already suspect, Karen acknowledged. If she didn't look the way she did, Luiz would never have even noticed her that day in Rio. It boded ill for the future.

Beatriz disappeared back indoors, leaving her to contemplate that future with growing despondency. It took the gathering ache in her lower back to bring her back to the present. She eased her position, but the ache remained, spreading now to her abdomen and increasing in intensity to a gripping pain.

The realisation of what was happening struck her with mind-numbing force. She clutched herself, as if it might be stopped by application of pressure, knowing it was a useless gesture. Nature held the upper hand.

'So here you are!' Luiz exclaimed, appearing round the corner of the veranda. 'I was beginning to—'

He broke off abruptly as he took in her position and drawn expression. 'What is it?'

'The baby,' she got out through clenched teeth. 'I'm losing the baby!'

Things happened in a blur from there. Luiz carried her into the house, an ambulance was called, and she was transported to the nearby clinic, where vain attempts were made to stay the process. Karen suffered through it all in silence, the sense of loss too deep for words. She knew Luiz was there with her, but there was no comfort to be found.

He was at the bedside when she awoke from a sedated sleep, strain etched deep on the olive features.

'I'm sorry,' she said tonelessly.

He took her hand, raising it to his lips. There were no amber lights in the dark eyes. 'If the fault lies with anyone at all, it must be mine for taking you on an unnecessary journey.'

'Do the doctors say that?' she asked.

'No,' he admitted. 'They tell me it just happens this way sometimes for no apparent reason.'

But not to his mistress, she thought. He should have married her, if only for his son's sake. The boy had more right to the Andrade name than any child she might have had.

‘They also tell me,’ he went on, ‘that there’s no reason why you shouldn’t carry a child to full-term in the future.’

‘Nothing to stop us trying again then.’

‘But not immediately.’ His tone was steady. ‘You need time to recover.’

‘Whatever you think,’ she said. She took her hand from him to push back the sheet and press herself upright. ‘I just want to get out of here.’

Christmas came and went quietly. With the miscarriage almost two weeks behind her, Karen insisted that celebrations for the New Year were not curtailed.

Open to all and sundry, the Guavada barbecue was renowned. It began at midday, to finish when the last reveller departed. Not even the hour-long summer rainstorm could dampen the party spirit. People either took shelter until it passed over, or simply stood around in it, depending on age. With the temperature hovering in the mid-eighties, there was little danger of catching a chill.

Luiz took over one of the grills himself after the rain stopped. Karen watched him as he doled out sizzling steaks to the seemingly never-ending line, exchanging repartee. Devastated though he’d been by the miscarriage, he’d proved a tower of strength the past two weeks. It was difficult to equate the man he appeared to be with the man she now knew him to be. ‘The master cooks well for us,’ said a voice she didn’t recognise.

She turned to view the man who had spoken, the smile ready on her lips fading a little as she met bold dark eyes. One of the ranch hands, judging from his clothing, she guessed. Young and good-looking, he appraised her in turn, his expression only too easily read.

‘Yes, he does,’ she replied in the same language. ‘You work for him?’

He inclined his head, his gaze discomfiting. ‘I am Lucio Fernandas. You are even more beautiful than it is said. Luiz is a lucky man!’

With her command of the language still in its infancy, and his speech fast, Karen had a struggle to translate but she got the gist. The words themselves were innocuous enough, the look accompanying them far from it.

Dona Ferrez came to her rescue, drawing her away before she could summon any kind of reply.

‘What was he saying to you?’ asked the older woman.

‘Nothing much,’ Karen answered, reluctant to make any fuss over what amounted to no more than a leer. She’d been treated to worse than that back home in England.

‘Luiz would not like it that he speak with you,’ Dona declared.

‘Then we won’t tell him,’ Karen said lightly. ‘Do you think anyone will think it rude of me if I take a bit of a siesta?’

‘Of course they will not! You must not tire yourself. I will tell Luiz where you are.’

Karen turned for the house as Dona headed for the grills, almost running into Beatriz. The other made no attempt to speak, her regard narrowed as if in contemplation. Whatever was brewing in the woman’s head, Karen was past caring. All she wanted at present was to lay her head on a soft pillow and sleep.

She awoke to the feather-light touch of lips on hers. Luiz smiled at her bemused expression.

‘I thought it time to come and check on you,’ he said.

‘How long have I been asleep?’ she asked.

‘More than two hours. Some of our guests have already left, but the rest seem prepared to stay out the rest of the day. Do you feel strong enough to rejoin them, or shall I ask them all to depart?’

‘Don’t do that.’ Karen sat up, swinging her legs to the floor as Luiz rose to his feet. ‘Give me fifteen minutes to have a shower and change my clothes, and I’ll be down.’

‘You’re sure you feel up to it?’ he insisted.

She felt anything but, only she wasn’t about to admit it. ‘Quite sure,’ she said.

Luiz drew her to her feet and into his arms, holding her close for a moment or two. ‘There can be other babies,’ he consoled. ‘There’s no haste. For now, we’ll rest content with each other.’

Until he felt moved to visit the woman who *had* provided him with a child, thought Karen hollowly.

The last of the revellers finally weaved their way homewards around ten, by which time even Regina had had enough.

‘I would like my birthday celebration at Café Lamas,’ she declared, naming the town’s top restaurant. ‘Eighteen is a very special age.’

‘It is indeed,’ agreed Luiz. ‘I’ll make the arrangements.’

‘And a car of my own?’ she suggested.

He smiled. ‘Reaching the age of authority to hold a licence is only a beginning. When you know how to drive a car, I may consider it.’

‘You can teach me, the way you taught Karen.’

‘When exactly *is* your birthday?’ Karen asked, forced to smile herself as she caught Luiz’s dry glance.

‘The thirteenth of January.’ Regina pulled a face. ‘Not a nice date on which to be born.’

Hardly an unlucky one for her, considering what she’d been born into, Karen reflected. A life of leisure until she married, and even then it would be to a man rich enough to keep her in the style to which she was accustomed.

Not that she had anything to complain about in that sense herself.

She left Luiz to share a nightcap with his brother. Beatriz followed her from the room.

‘I saw you with Lucio Fernandes earlier,’ she said. ‘As did others. It was fortunate that Luiz did not.’

‘Why?’ Karen asked. ‘Are the ranch hands considered too far down the social scale?’

‘For his wife to exchange banter with, yes.’

Karen opened her mouth to deny the allegation, cutting off the words in the certain knowledge that Beatriz would pay little heed. ‘Your concern does you credit,’ she said instead, and continued on her way.

She was in bed, though far from sleep, when Luiz came up. He had exercised the utmost forbearance since the miscarriage, although it couldn’t have been easy, she knew, for a man of his appetites to hold himself in check for so long.

Watching him as he undressed, she wanted him again, desperately enough to override everything else. She reached for him the moment he slid into the bed, bringing him to instant arousal.

Even then, he restrained himself long enough to take measures against conception. Karen made no protest. The last thing she wanted was another pregnancy.

Listening to his steady breathing later, feeling the muscular strength of his arms about her, she could almost feel sorry for the woman who would only know this on infrequent occasions. Sorry too for the boy who would grow up barely knowing his father at all. She might not have everything she desired herself, but she had so much. Could she begrudge the two of them so little?

The days slid by. Regina's birthday came and went with all the appropriate observance. Karen gave her a course of professional driving lessons to go with the sleek little sports model Luiz came up with despite all he'd said.

Life went along much the same as it had before the trip to Brasilia. A good life in most respects. Without Beatriz around, it might have been possible to come to terms with the situation, but the woman lost no opportunity to taunt her with the knowledge they shared whenever they were alone together.

Had she no pride, that she'd stay with a man who led a double life? she would jeer. Did she really believe he had any real depth of feeling for her?

Karen didn't believe it, but it still hurt to hear it put into words. Perhaps Beatriz was right, she told herself. She should have more pride. She still had enough left from the lottery win to pay her passage back to England. All it took was the will.

If she hadn't been so emotionally off-balance she would have seen what a crazy idea it was—that the only realistic course was to bring the whole affair out into the open—but it continued to fester at the back of her mind.

It took the photograph Beatriz showed her of mother and son to precipitate matters. Karen had known the woman would be beautiful, but she had expected a woman, not a teenage girl who could surely have been no more than sixteen when she had become pregnant.

How could Luiz live with himself? she thought numbly. How could *she* continue to live with him after this?

He'd left early without waking her that morning. Mind blanked of everything but the urge to get away, she left Beatriz and went upstairs to throw a few things haphazardly into a suitcase. Her passport was to hand. She stuffed that into a bag, along with what ready cash she could find. It wouldn't be enough to get her where she was going, and she'd never bothered with a cheque book, so she'd just have to use the credit card Luiz had provided her with to purchase a ticket home. What she would do when she got there, she didn't even think about.

Beatriz had disappeared. Regina had gone to visit a friend, and Raymundo was out somewhere too. Even the staff seemed to have vanished. She took the car she'd first learned to drive in, keeping her gaze fixed straight ahead as she headed out past the house that had been her home for the past months. That part of her life was finished with.

The drive to São Paulo was the longest she had undertaken on her own. The realisation, on reaching the Congonhas airport at last, that it only handled domestic flights, was dismaying. It meant retrieving the car from the car park where she'd left it, and driving many further kilometres to the international airport on the other side of the city.

She could take a bus to Guarulhas, a helpful counter clerk advised her. He even offered to check if there were any London flights scheduled, although he didn't hold out much hope of securing a seat at such short notice.

He was right about that. All London flights were booked solid for the next three weeks. There was one seat going spare on a flight from Rio at seven, he said, consulting the computer readout once more. He could get her on the three-thirty shuttle, which should give her plenty of time to cross to Rio's international airport.

Still in the grip of the same compulsion, Karen was ready to do whatever it took. She paid for both flights with the platinum card. An expensive detour, but Luiz could afford it.

It was a lengthy wait for the shuttle. The plane was full, the noise from a crowd of excited schoolchildren overpowering. Karen closed her eyes as they lifted off, only now beginning to come to her senses a little. Luiz wasn't going to just let her go like this. She was his wife, his property. Wherever she went, he'd find her, there was little doubt of that.

Well, let him! she thought resolutely. Once out of the country, she'd be safe from any attempt to force her back. If he wouldn't divorce her, she'd divorce him, however long it took.

The man occupying the seat at her side said something unintelligible and got to his feet, allowing someone else to slide into the seat. Some kind of mix up, she supposed.

'Fortune smiles on me!' declared the newcomer.

Karen opened her eyes to view the man in startled recognition, unable to believe that Lucio Fernandes was on the plane too.

'What are you doing here?' she asked blankly.

He flashed his teeth in a grin. 'Like you, I go to Rio. I have money. Much money! I can give you a good time.'

'Not in a thousand years!' she said in English.

If he didn't understand the words, he understood the meaning. The smile disappeared. Karen had no idea what his response was, although it certainly wasn't polite. She was thankful when he returned the seat to its original occupier.

She turned her attention to the window in order to avoid the man's obvious curiosity. The coincidence apart, there was something very odd about Fernandes being on the plane at all. She had no idea what the Guavada hands earned, but would have doubted it was enough to allow vacations in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

It was none of her business, anyway, she concluded. She had more important things on her mind.

Up to now she hadn't given a thought to what she was going to do on landing in London. Finding somewhere to stay would be a first priority. If Luiz cancelled the credit card—which was a possibility she hadn't taken into account—she'd be in real trouble. She could hardly turn up at Julie's door like some waif and stray.

It would be far more sensible to turn back and sort the whole thing out at source, she acknowledged, but common sense had played no part from the beginning of her whole relationship with Luiz. For better or for worse, she'd made her choice.

She took care on landing to steer well clear of any further encounter with Lucio Fernandes. Buses ran to the international airport but she'd be best taking a taxi, the counter clerk had told her. With two and a half hours still to go before the London flight, she should be fine, providing she could get transportation fairly quickly.

There were people milling around outside the concourse. Confused, Karen hesitated on the edge of the busy service road. That must be the taxi rank across there, she thought, catching a flash of yellow through the press. If she stepped lively...

CHAPTER TEN

KAREN caught sight of her watch as she slid the photograph back into the drawer where she had found it. She felt quite numb at present.

The money Lucio Fernandas had boasted of could only have come from Beatriz: she must have sent the man off post-haste to back up the story she had given Luiz. It suggested pre-planning: counting on the effect the photograph would have on a mind already primed. Considering the circumstances, she couldn't possibly have known about the Rio flight—that must have been his own idea—but it had certainly lent credence to the story.

Luiz was probably with his mistress right now. At this hour, his son would be in bed, leaving the two of them to catch up on the long weeks since their last meeting. It was back to square one, facing the problem her mind had solved once by returning her to a time before the lottery win that had begun it all. As that was unlikely to happen again, she had to deal with it this time. How, she couldn't even begin to think.

There was no sign of Beatriz when she emerged from the office. Not that she'd expected her to be hanging around. In no frame of mind to face anyone, she headed for the privacy of the bedroom.

It took sight of the bed she'd shared with Luiz these past weeks to unlock her emotions. When she thought of the way she'd gone to him that night—begged him to make love to her—she almost retched. To be disillusioned once was bad enough, but to go through it twice!

She was sitting by the window, still fully dressed, when Regina came up to find out what had happened to her.

'Are you feeling ill?' she asked anxiously.

'Just a bit off-colour, that's all,' Karen assured her.

'Do you think you might be pregnant again?' her sister-in-law ventured.

'No!' she snapped, immediately regretting it as she saw the expression on the younger girl's face. 'I doubt it,' she amended on a milder note. 'Sorry for being such a bear. I've got a really bad headache. Would you mind fetching me a couple of painkillers?'

Regina made for the bathroom with a readiness that made Karen ashamed, returning with the pills and a glass of water. 'If there is anything else I can do for you, you know you have only to ask,' she said.

'I know.' Karen forced a smile. 'Thanks.'

The headache was real enough, though she doubted if the aspirin would have any effect. Alone again, she tried to come to some kind of decision about where she went from here, but she was too weary in spirit. Luiz had said he'd be gone two or three days, so there was no immediate pressure.

She spent a restless night, getting up heavy-eyed and depressed. With no appetite, she went down to breakfast only to set Regina's mind at rest.

The others were already at the table. Beatriz looked unusually subdued. Probably realising the danger she'd placed herself in by allowing her animus to overcome her last night, Karen reflected. Luiz would be merciless when he knew she'd lied about Lucio Fernandas.

If he believed it, that was. She had no actual proof that Beatriz had plotted the whole thing.

‘You’re evil, do you know that?’ she accused the other woman when she got her alone. ‘Stupid too. If you’d left things the way they were, I might never have known what you were capable of!’

‘A mistake, I admit,’ Beatriz returned without remorse. ‘Although regaining your memory really changes very little when I come to consider. The fact that Lucio was on the same plane is still enough to condemn you.’

‘Not if I can prove that you paid him to follow me,’ Karen flashed back, bringing a sneer to her sister-in-law’s lips.

‘And how would you do that?’

‘Luiz has someone out searching for him. He’ll get to the truth!’

That gave Beatriz pause for a moment, but only for a moment. ‘First he has to find him,’ she said. ‘What should concern you more is the secret he’s kept from you all these months. How does it feel to know that he’s with Margarita and Maurice this moment?’

It felt, Karen thought, like a sword through her chest!

‘I’ll deal with that in my own time and my own way,’ she said. ‘I’ll leave *him* to deal with you.’

Beatriz eyed her with a certain calculation. ‘Will telling Luiz you recovered your memory really gain you anything?’

Nothing at all, she was bound to admit. It would still be her word against Beatriz’s with respect to Lucio Fernandes, with the fact that they’d both been on the Rio flight, coincidence though it must have been, weighing against her. And she would still have to face his duplicity.

‘Why not just leave things the way they are?’ Beatriz pursued, sensing her hesitation. ‘Do you think Luiz will cast Margarita and her son aside for you? *You* have his name. That is what matters.’

‘To you, maybe,’ Karen returned.

‘To any woman.’ Beatriz paused. ‘We might even become friends ourselves in time. Think on it.’

She moved away before Karen could reply. Not that she was in any doubt about her answer. She’d as soon put her trust in a rattlesnake!

The day dragged on interminably. Regina was like a cat on hot bricks waiting for Miran to call. She grew ever more despondent as the hours passed. With a good idea of what was coming, Karen had little desire to keep the appointment she’d made with the man herself.

She told no one she was going out after lunch. Miran was waiting at the corner of the central square in La Santa. He got into the car quickly, enabling her to drive on almost without stopping.

‘It’s good of you to come,’ he declared. ‘I’m concerned that Regina may have taken my attentions to mean more than I intended them to mean.’

‘What makes you think that?’ Karen asked cautiously.

‘The things she said at luncheon yesterday. She spoke of you and Luiz, and the way the two of you knew immediately that you wished to spend the rest of your lives together. She said that Luiz could have no complaint that we felt the same way about each other.’ He spread his hands. ‘I gave her no cause to believe such a thing!’

‘You paid her a lot of attention the other night,’ Karen responded, shelving her own problems for the present in sympathy with her sister-in-law’s coming disillusionment.

‘No more than I would pay any beautiful girl!’ he protested. ‘It was never my intention to suggest anything more than admiration for that beauty. You think she may have spoken with Luiz already?’ he added anxiously.

Karen gave him a disgusted glance, aware now of the main concern.

‘Luiz is in Brasilia,’ she said. ‘He knows nothing of this.’ She paused, marshalling her reserves. ‘I think you should be more careful of what you say and how you say it in future. I also think you should have had the decency to make your feelings clear when you met yesterday, instead of allowing Regina to go on imagining you shared her emotions.’

The handsome features took on a piqued expression. ‘You would have had me embarrass her that way?’

‘You could have found some way of letting her down gently if you’d really tried, instead of relying on someone else to put her straight. That’s what you are relying on, isn’t it?’

‘It’s best that she hear it from someone close to her who can offer comfort,’ he agreed shamelessly.

Karen curled a scornful lip. ‘Best for you, you mean. I think it might be a good idea if you go back to São Paulo today. I’m sure you can find some adequate excuse.’

‘Perhaps so,’ he said. He studied her for a moment, taking in the pure lines of her face, the silken sheen of her hair, his expression altering to one she was only too familiar with. ‘You’re very beautiful yourself.’

Karen turned a deaf ear. ‘I’ll take you back to the square.’

She was glad to have shut of him. Regina was going to suffer when he failed to get in touch again, but she’d get over it. The way *she* would have got over Luiz if she’d had the sense to return home all those months ago.

It was almost five o’clock when she got back to the house. Walking into the hall to see Luiz descending the stairs was a shock that left her momentarily lost for words.

‘You look as if you’d seen a ghost,’ he commented drily.

‘I wasn’t expecting to see you for another couple of days,’ she managed.

‘My business was completed in less time than anticipated.’ His appraisal too keen for comfort, he added, ‘I arrived home over an hour ago. Where have you been?’

‘Just driving around,’ she said. ‘If I’d known, of course—’

‘You would have been here to greet me,’ he finished for her. The dark brows lifted as she continued to stand there. ‘So, do I not get a welcome now?’

She went to him reluctantly, steeling herself for his kiss. Her toned down response drew a speculative look.

‘I think there are things we need to discuss,’ he said.

‘About what?’ she asked.

His lips twisted. ‘About the fact that I did you an injustice where Miran Villota is concerned. I’d seen you watching him during the evening. When you appeared to defend him later, I believed you were drawn to him.’ He held her close again, pressing his lips to her temple. ‘I can’t bear for you to be drawn to *any* other man!’

But it was all right for him to want another woman, she thought. Even more than one, for all she knew! She should do what she should have done weeks ago, and expose him for the hypocrite he was!

She didn't because she couldn't. Because, in spite of it all, she admitted wryly, he still exercised the same power. Just being here close to him now, she wanted him. When it came to matter over mind, it was just no contest.

'I've no interest in Miran Villota,' she said.

'I know that now. I must learn to curb my possessiveness.' He kissed her again and released her, his smile a caress in itself. 'I have much to make up for.'

He'd expect to do that tonight in bed, of course. That gave her five or six hours to come to some final decision. Either she faced him with the truth, or she did as Beatriz had suggested and settled for what she had.

The evening stretched interminably. Regina was so unusually quiet Luiz was drawn to ask if she was suffering some ailment. He looked unconvinced when she denied it, though he didn't pursue the subject.

A little on edge to begin with, Beatriz relaxed as time went on, contempt in her eyes when she looked Karen's way. She was assuming too much too soon, Karen could have told her; the decision was still to be made.

Regina singled her out at the first opportunity, her lovely young face downcast.

'Miran didn't call,' she said. 'Do you think I should call him?'

Karen hesitated, not at all sure she was capable of handling other problems in addition to her own right now.

'I think it would be best to wait and see,' she advised at length.

Her sister-in-law's face clouded even further. 'You think I was too hasty, don't you?' she said miserably. 'That I took his interest in me for more than it was?'

It was sometimes necessary to be cruel to be kind, Karen reflected, and took the plunge. 'It's possible, yes. Men like Miran are not the kind to put any trust in.'

'But he was so wonderful to me!' Regina burst out. 'If he felt nothing for me, why did he allow me to believe he did?'

'I'm sure he did feel something for you.'

'But not enough.' Tears were threatening. 'Why did he not stop me from making a fool of myself!'

'Perhaps he just couldn't find it in himself to hurt you,' Karen murmured.

Regina dashed the back of her hand across her eyes. 'The hurt is no less now than it would have been then. I'll never trust any man again!'

'They're not all the same,' Karen comforted, wishing she could be convinced of that herself. 'You've all the time in the world to find the right one.'

She'd thought Luiz engrossed in conversation with his brother. Looking up to find his gaze fixed on the two of them was disconcerting. He would naturally want to know what Regina was upset about, but his sister would be even more mortified than she already was to have him know about it.

Regina compounded speculation by eating little at dinner. She excused herself with a plea of tiredness the moment the meal was finished, and departed for bed. Karen toyed with the idea of following her up to offer more comfort, but decided that she was probably best left alone for now.

She had her own troubles still to deal with anyway. As time crept on, she grew ever more uncertain of which way to go. Her heart almost broke through her ribcage when Luiz suggested it was time they retired

for the night.

‘Why was Regina weeping?’ he asked as they mounted the stairs.

‘It’s private,’ Karen answered. ‘Woman to woman.’

Luiz gave her a shrewd glance ‘Nothing to do with Miran Villota?’

‘I thought *I* was the one supposed to be interested in him?’ she responded.

‘A mistake for which I already apologised,’ he said without inflection. ‘I don’t need to be reminded of it. I trust the distress has no physical basis?’

Further denials were useless, Karen decided resignedly. ‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘Regina would never allow herself to be taken in that far.’

‘It can happen.’ They had reached their door. Luiz opened it, ushering her through ahead of him. ‘I believed she had learned to be a little more selective.’

He was referring to the affair with Jorge Arroyo, Karen guessed. Something Regina could have told her about since the memory loss, of course, but she refrained from comment.

‘You wish to use the bathroom first?’ he asked, already unbuttoning his shirt.

She seized on the chance to extend the decision time, knowing she was only putting off the inevitable.

She always took a shower before going to bed. Tonight, there was no stimulation to be found.

Her mind was going round in circles. She couldn’t ask Luiz to give up his son, but she could demand that he give up any sexual relationship with the child’s mother. Always providing one still existed. She still had no proof of it.

Recalling the girl in the photograph, she felt no reassurance. Luiz was a lover of beauty in women, and Margarita’s looks left nothing to be desired.

She was still standing there under the flow when the cabinet door slid open. Luiz stepped in at her back, hands sliding around her to seek the firm curve of her breasts, lips nuzzling her nape, exposed by the shower cap she was wearing.

‘You were gone too long,’ he breathed against her skin. ‘I could wait no longer for you!’ He smoothed a slow passage down the length of her body to seek her inner softness, bringing her to quivering life. ‘You fill my every waking thought—even my dreams! No other woman could ever match you!’

If it weren’t for the last, she would have succumbed without a struggle. She stiffened in his grasp, fighting the urge to let go with the invective clamouring for release.

‘Would it ever occur to you that I might not be in the mood?’ she asked with what control she could muster. ‘Or is it taken for granted that wives have to be permanently on heat?’

For a moment there was no reaction at all. When he moved it was abruptly, stepping away from her as though he’d been stung. Karen’s legs felt weak, her whole body shivery. She’d hit him where it would reckon the most, but there was little satisfaction in it.

He was sitting in a chair wearing a silk robe when she eventually emerged from the bathroom. He viewed her towelling cover-up with cynical eyes.

‘You need have no fear. I’ve no intention of forcing you into fulfilling your duties.’

‘It hadn’t occurred to me that you would,’ she said. ‘I’m entitled to refuse on occasion.’

The muscles around his mouth tautened. 'You're entitled to refuse any time you wish, but there are ways of doing it that—'

'That don't undermine your pride?' Her tone was scathing. 'Why should yours be any more important than mine?'

Regard narrowed, he said softly, 'I think there's more to this than a simple lack of desire. Something happened to you while I was away.'

If ever there was a time, that time was now, but the words wouldn't form.

'Perhaps I just came to my senses at last,' she heard herself saying instead. 'Perhaps I realised that being married to you isn't such a bed of roses after all.'

'I've heard no complaints before this.' The level tone was belied by the glitter in the dark eyes. 'On the contrary, in fact.'

'That was then, this is now.' She was getting in deeper and deeper, yet she couldn't stop herself, the need to hurt paramount. 'I want out!'

Luiz came to his feet in one rapid movement, crossing the room in a stride to take hold of her. The kiss was scorching, his arms like iron bands across her back. Karen staggered a little when he released her.

'There will be no divorce!' he gritted.

'Even if it turned out to be true after all about Lucio Fernandas?' she said with the same heedless compulsion.

The glitter in his eyes became a blaze, smothered in seconds by sheer force of will. 'Even then,' he declared. 'You signed a contract with no escape clause.'

He turned away from her, heading across the room to the communicating door. Karen watched him go in numb acceptance. There was no going back from here. She'd made her decision; now she had to live with it.

Regina seemed to have recovered much of her usual spirits in the morning. The resilience of youth, Karen thought wryly, feeling anything but herself.

Luiz wasn't at breakfast. He'd gone out early, she said when Beatriz asked where he was. The woman suspected something amiss, that was obvious, although she made no comment. Karen would have loved to wipe the smug expression from her face, but it was too late for that.

She went out on to the veranda after the meal. Raymundo followed her, eyeing her with some concern as he took a seat.

'Have you and Luiz had a disagreement?' he asked with a delicacy that might have been amusing in normal circumstances.

'Something like that,' she said. She gave him a smile. 'It will soon blow over.'

He looked unconvinced. 'Luiz can sometimes be a little too assertive, I know.'

Like laying down the law about his own situation, she thought. She opened her mouth to commiserate with him, closing it again with the realisation that what he'd told her about his marriage had been before her memory loss. It was difficult to recall exactly what had happened when. One mistake could expose her.

So what? asked the small voice of reason. Things could hardly be any worse than they were right now. If nothing else, it would help explain last night's episode.

Why bother? another part of her mind asked. Even if they came to some kind of agreement over Margarita and her son, Luiz would never forgive the things she'd said to him. Like Raymundo himself, she'd made her bed and must lie on it.

'I suppose I'm a bit too assertive myself at times,' she said, trying to inject a touch of humour. 'If Luiz had wanted a wife with no spirit, he would have chosen one,' Raymundo answered. 'He loves you the way you are. I only wish—' He broke off, looking uncomfortable. 'I must be going. I'm sure you will soon be friends again.'

His married life was certainly no bed of roses, Karen reflected as he went back indoors. Beatriz treated him like dirt. His own fault, maybe, but love was notoriously blind in its early stages. She should have remembered that herself.

Luiz didn't come back for lunch either. Karen took the pups for a walk, then retired on the pretext of taking a siesta, though sleeping was the last thing she felt like doing.

She tried to concentrate on a book, but the words made no sense. Eventually, she gave up and just sat there waiting. Luiz had to return some time.

The afternoon was drawing towards evening when he finally put in an appearance. Dressed in his working gear, he came straight to the room she was occupying, face rigid as he regarded her.

'So you had no interest in Villota!' he jerked out. 'Don't try to deny it! You were seen with him in La Santa!'

It had been on the cards, Karen supposed. The possibility had simply been pushed to the back of her mind by everything else.

'I wasn't going to deny it,' she said resignedly. 'We were together no more than fifteen minutes.'

Luiz curled a lip. 'Long enough.'

'Not for what you're thinking.' She came to her feet, shaky but not cowed. 'I was hoping not to have to tell you, but it seems I've no choice. Miran asked me to meet him to talk about Regina. He was afraid she'd taken his interest in her a little too seriously, and didn't know what to do about it.'

Fury leapt in the dark eyes. 'Don't you dare bring Regina's name into this!'

'It's true.' Karen tried to keep her tone level. 'The reason she was so unhappy last night was because Miran had failed to contact her. I thought it best to simply let the whole thing fade away. Miran will be back in São Paulo by now, so she's unlikely to see him again.'

Luiz regarded her with scepticism. 'You expect me to believe you were acting purely in Regina's interests?'

'Not really.' Karen drew a shallow breath, starting to lose her grip. 'You believe me guilty of having the affair with Lucio Fernandes. Why should you trust my word now? I spent several minutes in private conversation with your brother this morning. Perhaps I've designs on him too!'

'That's enough!' Luiz clipped.

'No, it isn't!' She was past caring what she let out. 'If you really want to know why Lucio was on the plane, ask your sister-in-law! Not that I'd expect you to take my word against hers, of course, but if you'd taken the trouble to check your credit card statement for January, you might have seen that I only paid for *one* ticket to Rio, and the same to London. Oh, I saw him on the plane—he was bragging about having lots of money—but he wasn't with me!'

Luiz was gazing at her in dawning realisation. 'You recovered your memory!'

‘Every last detail! I suppose I should be flattered that you abandoned your mistress and son to get back to me yesterday—especially when you see so little of them. It’s a pity...’

Karen broke off, struck by the expression on the lean, bronzed face.

‘My *what?*’ he asked.

‘It’s no use trying to deny it,’ she retorted. ‘I’ve seen the photograph you keep in your office drawer. Your son looks just like you!’

‘He looks,’ Luiz said levelly, ‘like my brother Maurice. He was killed in a road accident more than two years ago, before he could put right the wrong he’d done. Margarita mourns him still. She would consider me no substitute.’

Karen swallowed on the dryness in her throat, her mind in turmoil. ‘I’m sorry,’ she got out. ‘I didn’t... know.’

‘Obviously.’ Luiz indicated the chair she’d risen from. ‘I think you’d better sit down before you fall down.’

She did so, trying to get her head round it all. ‘I don’t understand. Beatriz—your mother—they both told me the child was yours.’

‘They both lied.’ The statement was iron-hard. ‘I took over responsibility for Margarita and Maurice as a duty. I visit them when I’m in Brasilia on business, no other time. The photograph was given to me as a mark of gratitude.’

He studied her bewildered face, his own softening a little. ‘How long have you been able to remember?’

‘Only since yesterday.’ She looked at him appealingly. ‘What I said to you last night. It wasn’t true, any of it. I was eaten up with jealousy. I couldn’t stand the thought of sharing you with anyone.’

‘I know the feeling,’ he said.

‘There was no affair. Not with Lucio Fernandas, not with Jorge Arroyo, not with anyone.’

‘I believe you.’ His tone was wry. ‘You were right. If I’d checked the statement it would have proved what you say.’ His brows drew together again. ‘But that still doesn’t explain why you took flight.’

‘I’m afraid that was Beatriz too. She showed me the photograph, told me you already had a child. I didn’t stop to think things through.’

‘You were still suffering the trauma of losing the baby,’ he said grimly. ‘She will pay dearly for that alone. You believe she paid Fernandas to follow you?’

‘She didn’t actually deny it when I faced her with it yesterday, just said it would be hard to prove.’ Karen made a rueful gesture. ‘I let her persuade me that the doubt would still be there in your mind even if I told you I’d got my memory back. I’d almost managed to persuade myself that I could live with things the way they were—until you came to me in the shower. I wanted to hurt you. I wanted to make you feel the way I was feeling. Your pride—’

‘Damn my pride!’ he said forcefully. ‘It was my heart that was shattered! I’ve never loved any woman before you. I could never think of loving any woman other than you!’

He drew her to her feet again, holding her close, his hands buried in her hair, eyes glowing with an inner fire. ‘The moment I saw you, I was lost! I wanted to spend my life with you, to raise a family, to grow old alongside you. I know you don’t feel as much for me, but—’

‘Perhaps not in the beginning,’ she said softly, ‘but I do now. I’ve gone through hell all day thinking about you.’ She lifted her hands to his face, tracing the incisive lines with her fingertips. ‘It’s still hard to believe it’s all ended! All the wondering and doubting. I love you so much, Luiz.’ She gave a shaky smile. ‘Do you think we could go back to where we were last night before I launched that rocket? I’ve so much to make up for.’

‘The fault was never yours,’ he said. ‘Beatriz is responsible for most of what we’ve both gone through, but my mother must share the blame.’

He kissed her tenderly on the lips, then put her from him, jaw hardening. ‘We’ll go back to where we were, never fear, but first I have to deal with my brother and his wife.’

‘Raymundo doesn’t know what she’s been up to,’ Karen defended. ‘He’ll be devastated!’

‘He’ll be more than that. They’ll both of them be gone within the hour, I can promise you!’

‘You can’t throw your brother out,’ she protested as he started for the door. ‘He loves Guavada!’

Luiz looked back at her with a frown. ‘Are you suggesting I allow Beatriz to get away with what she’s done?’

‘No.’ Karen could say that without hesitation. ‘I hate her for it! But let Raymundo stay. He’ll be only too happy to be free of her. I know he’s been weak—*he* knows he’s been weak—but give him a chance. There are times when divorce is the only path left to take.’

‘There have been times when such a heartfelt plea on behalf of another man—even my own brother—would have been incentive enough to be rid of him,’ came the reply after a moment. ‘I’ll let him decide for himself whether he stays or goes, if it makes you happy.’

‘Not just me,’ she said. ‘You lost one brother, you can’t afford to lose another. And Regina needs you both.’

Luiz came back to where she stood to take her in his arms again, lips cherishing hers.

‘You are everything a woman should be,’ he said gruffly. ‘Don’t go away.’

Karen had no intention. She watched him go out of the door, loving every masterful, masculine inch of him. She could almost feel sorry for Beatriz, who was going to get the shock of her life. Raymundo would opt to stay, for certain. Eventually he’d meet someone who was right for him.

In the meantime, she and Luiz had a family of their own to build. Starting the moment he returned.

She could hardly wait.

EPILOGUE

‘**MY WAIST** is a whole three inches bigger than it was when I married you,’ Karen complained, checking the tape measure.

‘One for each baby,’ Luiz returned easily. ‘Some sacrifices have to be made.’

‘And what exactly have *you* sacrificed?’ she asked in mock indignation.

He laughed. ‘I gave up my freedom for you. The biggest sacrifice a man can make! Are you coming to bed, or do I have to come and fetch you?’

Green eyes sparkled. ‘You’ll have to catch me first!’

She gave a yelp as he shot from the bed at the speed of lightning to sling her up across his shoulder, pummelling at his bare back with both fists. ‘Unfair advantage! I wasn’t ready!’

‘I am,’ he said, dumping her on the pillows.

He wasn’t lying. Karen melted beneath him, aroused as always by the muscular strength of him, the oiled smoothness of his skin, the masculine scent. Thirty-eight, and still not one ounce of surplus flesh on his frame.

He took it slowly, making her wait—trailing feathery kisses down over her fluttering stomach muscles to linger for endless, tantalising moments before bestowing the most intimate of kisses. She writhed in ecstasy, fingers tangled in the thicket of black curls.

He never tired of making love to her, never left her unsatisfied. A man in a million! she told herself eons later in the lazy, hazy aftermath.

Six years! It had passed so fast. Edmundo had been born almost exactly nine months after Beatriz’s hasty departure, with Joana eighteen months later, and Maria Teresa just last year. Edmundo looked more and more like his father every day, while the girls took after her. Exactly how it should be, Luiz had declared.

Life couldn’t be better than this, Karen thought contentedly. Each and every day she thanked her lucky stars. Without that lottery win, she would never have come to Brazil, never have known Luiz, never have given birth to these three particular children. It had to be kismet!

Luiz had never revealed exactly what passed between him and his sister-in-law that afternoon, but she’d been gone, as he’d promised, within the hour. Raymundo had not been held entirely blameless, but he’d been allowed to stay on at Guavada. The divorce had gone through eventually, though he hadn’t found another wife yet. Once bitten, twice shy, Karen supposed.

Regina had been married two years to a man Luiz knew and trusted. No children so far, but there was time. Margarita was married too now, which meant Luiz no longer had sole responsibility for his brother’s son, although he still saw the boy when he visited Brasilia.

Although Cristina had claimed sincere remorse for the harm she’d done, Luiz had never really forgiven her. Karen doubted if she and her mother-in-law would ever have a good relationship.

‘Not asleep yet?’ asked Luiz softly, bringing a smile to her face in the darkness.

‘Maybe you could sing me a lullaby,’ she said.

He laughed. ‘I think I might have a better remedy than that.’

‘And you call *me* insatiable,’ she accused as he drew her on top of him.

‘I thought we might try for another inch on that waistline of yours,’ he said. ‘Another boy would be nice.’

Karen arched her back, relishing the feel of him deep inside her. Another baby of any description would be nice, she thought happily.

‘Perhaps you could manage twins this time,’ she said. ‘One of each. Five sounds a good number to finish on. On the other hand, all things being equal, we could go for a whole football team. Five a side, girls against boys! Just think of—’

Luiz was laughing; she could feel it right the way through her. He reached up to draw her down to him, cutting off the words with a kiss that drove whatever she had been about to say from her mind.

Not that it mattered.

Bought by Her Latin Lover

By Julia James



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CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

CHAPTER ONE

SHE looked like a tart!

Rosalind stared, repelled, at her garish reflection in the mirror propped on the chest of drawers in her cramped bedroom. She had far too much make-up on, and her long dark hair was extravagantly moussed into a stiff mass around her face. Her eyes were black sockets, lashes weighed down with mascara, and her mouth was a scarlet pout. Long, shiny earrings jangled from her lobes, and loops of equally shiny chains draped round her neck, cascading into her exposed cleavage.

She glanced down at her dress and shuddered. Slinky silver lamé, slit to the thigh, with a halter neck that showed half her breasts, it was the very last thing she would have chosen to wear. But it hadn't been her choice.

'Here,' Sable had said, 'I brought one of my outfits for you. Your boobs are bigger than mine, but it should fit you. You'll look totally sexy—and that's what Yuri'll want. He loves having lookers around him. All rich guys do. And you are one hell of a looker, Ros, even if you don't make use of your looks! Still, at least it means I don't have to worry about you getting ideas of your own about Yuri!'

Rosalind had given her assurance on that point without contest. It was the last thing on her mind. In fact, she didn't want to go anywhere near Sable's boyfriend—whose main attraction, she knew, was his wealth and the way he splashed it around on Sable—but she was in no position to refuse. Sable had come to her aid, big-time, and what she wanted Rosalind to do tonight was little enough...even if it did fill her with the deepest reluctance.

'All I need you to do,' Sable had gone on, 'is babysit Yuri for me and keep other girls off him! That lot would kill for a chance of replacing me if they could! God,' she'd groaned, holding her stomach. 'I swear I'll never eat lobster again. I've been throwing up all day!'

Now, as Rosalind stared at her reflection, her own stomach started to nip at her. She really, really didn't want to do this. Leaving alone her reluctance to go anywhere near Sable's amoral lifestyle, it also meant closing the café early and losing the tips that she counted on to boost her meagre wage. But the badly paid job came with a free room over the café, and that was worth a lot to her—accommodation on this increasingly popular part of the Spanish coast was punishingly expensive to an ex-pat like her, who had to count every euro she earned twice over.

A grim, taut look crossed her face. Money. The relentless, punishing need for it dominated her existence, making her work every waking hour, allowing her no time for anything else. Certainly no time to doll up and swan off for the evening.

Sable, of course, thought her a fool.

'God, Ros, with your looks you should be living the life of Reilly! Honestly, if you'd just see sense and pal up with me your worries would be over! There are guys like Yuri all over the place—oozing dosh and chucking it around. You could get your hands on it *no problemo* if you just lightened up!'

For 'lighten up', Rosalind knew, read 'sleep around with rich guys'—the way Sable did.

Well, that way wasn't for her. It never could be. She shuddered at the very thought. Unlike Sable. Sable clearly had no problem with living off men and paying her way with her body.

Then, Rosalind felt quietly ashamed. She had overwhelming cause to be grateful to Sable—Sable had come to her rescue when she was totally desperate. She had no right to condemn her.

Nor, she recalled as she picked up the other girl's silver evening bag and headed for the door with heavy heart, had she any right to refuse Sable the favour she asked. However reluctantly she did it.

Cesar Montarez's mouth tightened imperceptibly as he surveyed the group who were clustering around a blackjack table.

'Yuri Rostrov,' murmured the man at his side, keeping his voice low. 'Drugs, arms smuggling, extortion, protection rackets...do you want me to go on?'

His boss gave a curt negative. 'Let's just get him out of here. Give me time to feed him the usual line, then start looking visible—but not too visible.'

Cesar Montarez's head of security nodded briefly. It was a routine they'd used before. Low-key, but usually effective.

'He won't like it,' he cautioned his boss. 'He's winning.'

Cesar shrugged. 'Too bad.' For a moment he wished he could deal with his unwelcome customer the way he really wanted to—with his fists. Scum like Rostrov were not welcome at El Paraíso, however lavishly they wanted to spend their ill-gotten wealth. But such methods were inappropriate for the luxurious up-market surroundings of the resort casino. Better by far to get rid of gangsters like Rostrov in ways that did no damage to the décor....

Steadily he made his way across the crowded floor, pausing to greet familiar and valued patrons, dutifully admiring his female guests and using his practised skill in keeping each of them at an appropriate distance, however much they might want to encourage him to linger. Eventually his apparently leisurely progress brought him within eyeline of his target.

As he stopped to return the genial hail of one of the casino's regular visitors, a wealthy, retired pro-golfer who was keen to go into business with him, his eyes slipped over the other man's shoulder. Rostrov and his party were still dominating one of the blackjack tables, the gangster giving a loud triumphant laugh as he won yet another hand, his pleasure echoed sycophantically by his entourage. The men had surrounded themselves with the usual cluster of girls, who were hanging on to them with painted nails, giggling and gasping as Rostrov won again.

The imperceptible tightening of Cesar's mouth came again. That was another good reason for getting Rostrov out of here. Girls like that were not welcome here either. The casino could do without them. Sure, he liked beautiful women to be seen here—it was good for business. Rich men always liked eye-candy around them wherever they went to spend their money. But Cesar had no intention of letting the casino become a place known to be frequented by females one step away from the bordello.

However stunning they were.

Like that one—

His dark eyes flickered momentarily over one of the females hanging out with Rostrov. The girl was a whole lot better-looking than the three other floozies in the party, with a profile that drew a grudging tribute from his discerning, if contemptuous eye. In fact, he found himself thinking to his own disapproval, she really was one of the most stunning females he'd ever set eyes on.

All wasted.

The natural beauty she had been graced with was ruined by her overdone face and hair and her totally tasteless silver lamé dress, slit up to the top of her thigh. One of Rostrov's sidekicks had his arm around her, pulling her into his side. It distorted the bodice of the dress, pulling at its plunging neckline so that half her

right breast was showing. The girl hadn't even noticed—and if she had she wouldn't have cared, Cesar knew. If she cared about little niceties like excess cleavage she'd hardly be the type to be hanging around with garbage like this.

Time to get rid of her. Time to get rid of them all. Taking polite leave of the golfer, he closed in on his unwanted guests.

Rosalind tried to stop herself shuddering. The one that seemed to be called Gyorg had got hold of her, and was plastering her against him. His fat hand was curved possessively over her naked shoulder, caressing her flesh. As Yuri Rostrov beat the dealer yet again, Gyorg said something loud and admiring in his own language to him, and caressed her shoulder again.

Oh, God, get me out of here!

Her plea went unnoticed, just as it had all evening. She'd known the moment she'd introduced herself to the flashily dressed, heavy-set Eastern European businessmen in the hotel bar back in town that the evening was going to be every bit as bad as she'd feared.

But she was in no position to say no to Sable—none whatsoever.

And that was the reason she was still here, letting herself be pawed. That was why she was sticking it out, smiling and smiling until she thought her jaw would break with it, laughing when everyone else laughed, while privately counting the endless minutes until it was over.

Silently she repeated Sable's advice. *All you have to do is smile and be nice.*

And that, whatever it took, was what Rosalind was going to keep doing. Smile and be nice. Smile and be nice.

Till the hellish evening was finally over.

It wasn't even as if she was managing to do what Sable wanted, she thought viciously—keep other women off Yuri. The other two girls had made a beeline for him, and he seemed quite happy to let them—and pass Rosalind over to Gyorg.

As she tried not to inhale the sickly scent of the man's heavily applied cologne, she noticed that the croupier, a slim, expressionless man, was glancing at someone approaching the table. Rosalind twisted her head slightly to see.

She inhaled sharply, then the breath stilled in her throat. A man had come up to Yuri and started to talk to him quietly. Rosalind couldn't take her eyes off him.

He was Spanish, of that there was no doubt. The dark olive skin, the even darker eyes and hair, and the long, sweeping lashes which only seemed to enhance his searing masculinity all showed his Hispanic heritage. But for a Spaniard he was tall, easily six feet, yet he still had that svelte, almost feline grace that so many of his compatriots possessed. But did they all possess that hint of Moorish ancestry, that aquiline nose, those hooded eyes, those smooth, high cheekbones? That sculpted, sensual mouth?

Rosalind felt her skin tightening. She had seen many fantastic-looking males since coming out to Spain, but none had ever simply made her want to stare, open-mouthed at them...

And it wasn't just that he was the most fabulous-looking male she'd ever seen—it wasn't just his eye-riveting good looks that were drawing her. There was something tough about him, something dangerous, even, something that made her know, instinctively, that he was not a man to mess with, that other men would always treat him with caution and respect.

Just as women would always want him to take them to bed...

She inhaled again, just as sharply, but this time it was in shocked self-reproof. What the hell was she thinking of? You couldn't set eyes on a man and five seconds later think about sex!

You could with him—

No. Her mouth tightened. Stop this. Right now. He's just an exceptionally handsome man, that's all. And these are *hardly* the circumstances to be thinking about men! The only thing you need to think about is getting through the rest of this evening without running away!

As she steeled herself against her runaway hormones, it dawned on her that the tension amongst the Eastern Europeans was suddenly palpable. They were looking grim. And very unhappy about something.

The Spaniard said something more to them. He was speaking in a low voice, but this time—concentrating on what he was saying, not the way he looked—Rosalind strove to make out the words. He was speaking English, probably the only language he had in common with them, and his accented voice had a compelling edge to it.

‘—it's out of my hands,’ she heard him say, and he glanced speakingly across the crowded room.

Rosalind watched Yuri Rostrov follow the line of the Spaniard's glance, and saw his face tense.

‘You see?’ murmured the Spaniard. Through the crowd, Rosalind fancied she could see someone making his way towards them. A tough-looking man with a determined look on his face.

The Spaniard was taking out a notebook from inside his dinner jacket. He spoke briefly to the croupier in Spanish, who answered as briefly, then scrawled a number with a whole load of zeroes on it and initialled it. He handed it across to Yuri.

‘With the compliments of the house,’ he said.

The gambler took the paper, glanced at it, his expression changing. The displeasure seemed to evaporate.

Cesar had known it would. It was costing him to get rid of the gangster, but it was worth it—every cent. Doubling the man's winnings was a small price to pay for getting him off the premises—achieved by telling him that the Spanish police had plain-clothes detectives patrolling the casino because they suspected it was being used to launder illicit money. He'd swallowed the line totally, and Cesar didn't expect to see his unwanted guests back again any time soon.

As Rostrov nodded, and snapped his fingers at his entourage, Cesar allowed himself to relax minutely. As he did so his eyes flickered over the girl again. He wished they hadn't. Close up, she was even more stunning than he'd thought from a distance. Face on was even better than her profile. A perfect oval, delicate nose, perfect lips, and a pair of eyes that were as green as emeralds.

And as for her body...

For a woman she was tall, but she wasn't one of those bony racehorse types. She had a figure—a curve to her hip that the glittering silver atrocity hugged all too lovingly, and breasts too full for the skimpy halter neck bodice, skewed sideways as it was. Though, he mused, that did allow him to see just about all of one peach of a breast except the nipple.

As he felt his body react predictably he doused his lust. He had no interest in girls like her. She and the others would be passed around like candy tonight amongst Rostrov and his cronies—soiled goods was too polite a name for her.

Two thin lines of colour stained Rosalind's cheekbones—though they hardly showed beneath the blusher. The Spaniard was looking at her—and she knew exactly what he was seeing.

He's seeing a tart. A total tart.

What galled her most was that she knew she could not blame him for thinking that. What else would he think about her and the other girls, whose names she didn't even know, but that they were the type to hang on to rich men for what they could get out of them?

She dragged her eyes away. There was nothing she could do about the way the man looked at her—and she had no choice whether to be here or not. Sable had called in a favour and she was in no position to balk at it.

They were moving off. Gyorg, keeping his arm tight around her, followed Yuri. One of the other girls was hanging off Yuri's arm, petulantly asking what was happening. He ignored her, saying something to his compatriots. They headed for the cashier and Rosalind waited while Yuri was handed what looked like a vast wad of notes, which he counted, then stashed inside his jacket.

So much money—Rosalind could hardly tear her eyes away...

As they headed out into the vast concourse of the casino, Rosalind was aware of the Spaniard still watching them.

He must be the house detective, or casino security, she thought. Making sure we clear off. Maybe he'd been warning Yuri Rostrov that some business rival had tracked him down, ready to turn ugly over a bad deal. Whatever it was, Yuri definitely didn't want to stick around.

The chill night air hit her as they walked out of the casino on to the covered forecourt. It was too early in the year even to be called spring by British standards, let alone Spanish. She shivered, and felt Gyorg tighten his grip on her.

'I keep you warm.' He grinned down at her, gold gleaming generously in his mouth, brandy fumes thick on his breath.

His English was not good, and his accent was strong. But the look in his eyes was clear enough. Rosalind stretched her mouth in her false grimace again, and made no answer. As her eyes adjusted to the light she saw the tall, good-looking Spaniard standing by the open doorway. For a second she felt his eyes on her.

And she felt his scorn whip at her.

She dropped her eyes down to the stone flagging, not wanting to see him, and when she looked up again he was gone.

A huge black limo was pulling up in front of their party. One of Yuri's sidekicks flung open the door.

'Where are we going?' she heard herself ask sharply.

'Hotel,' supplied Gyorg helpfully. 'Mr Rostrov's suite. We have party there.'

She pulled away. She couldn't help it.

The man seemed to think it part of a ploy. He yanked her back, closer to him, his fat hand beefy and strong. He bent his mouth to her ear.

'Suite has hot-tub. We all get clean!' He gave a coarse laugh and rubbed his fat hand up and down Rosalind's upper arm. 'I scrub you all over.' He laughed again, even more coarsely. 'I scrub lovely naked body all over!'

Rosalind froze, from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet.

Cesar raised a hand in acknowledgement to the parking valet who had brought his car round, and lowered himself in with lithe grace. He was glad to be heading off. The evening had left a bad taste in his mouth.

Disposing of the gangsters had been simple enough, but he didn't like the fact that they had been there in the first place. As he gunned the engine he glanced up at the wide portico of the casino. How many years had it taken him to create such a place? Sometimes, he thought wearily, it seemed like a lifetime, yet he had become one of the coast's premier resort owners in under twelve years. Twelve hard years of turning himself from an impoverished graduate to a successful businessman.

Not that the times hadn't been with him. The Spanish Mediterranean coastline was a goldmine, whether you targeted the budget tourists or those that he focused on—the extremely non-budget visitors, who just wanted to burn money ostentatiously on everything from yachts to green fees.

He nosed his open-topped car down the palm-lined drive that led through the landscaped grounds of El Paraíso, past the fork that would have taken him down to the deluxe hotel, nestling above the private beach, with its tiers of swimming pools and hideaway villas overlooking the marina where millionaires moored their yachts before coming to gamble away their money at the El Paraíso casino, or play golf at the exclusive golf club adjoining the hotel.

The resort coined money—so did its sister resort on Majorca, and the one in the Algarve. Cesar felt his mind slipping away into familiar territory—business expansion. Where to open the next El Paraíso? Menorca, perhaps, or one of the Canary Islands? Or the fast-developing Costa de Luz on Spain's Atlantic coastline? Or even on the north coast, where Edwardian aristocracy had loved to gamble away their City dividends and estate rents?

A thin smile pulled at his mouth. A hundred years on and Spain was still a mecca for northern Europeans hungry for the sun. Their hunger had brought prosperity, but at a price. The old Spain was changing, disappearing for ever. The poverty was going, too, yes, but so were the traditions, the culture, the differences that had set Spain apart for centuries from the rest of Europe once the glory days of the sixteenth century had dwindled away like spent Inca gold.

He pulled his mind away. History was a subject that would fascinate him all his days, he knew—but the times when he had once thought to be a professor of the subject were long gone. He had pursued money instead, and had done so with a success even he had not dreamed of. And now money pursued him.

As did women.

A cynical light lit his dark eyes as he headed out on to the main coastal road and speeded up. Women had always come easily to him—especially the northern girls, who seemed to go sex-mad when they reached Spain!—but at least when he'd been an impecunious waiter working in his vacations he'd known that the main attraction was him—not what he could spend on them.

Since making his money it had been different. The cynical expression deepened as he put his foot down on the accelerator. He could still remember his first feeling of genuine shock when he'd realised that when a man made money he could have just about any woman he wanted. The coast was littered with women who were on the make for a rich man. Any rich man. Old, ugly, fat—women like that didn't care.

It had been an eye-opener, and a sobering one at that. Discovering that they found his wallet even sexier than they found him.

He changed gear and revved the engine. Well, at least he'd wised up fast. These days he was cynical enough to ensure that he only picked those women who at least provided the best packaging—and he never kept them long anyway. There was always a fresh batch to choose from, whenever he wanted.

His mouth tightened. Was it going to be like that for ever? Just a passing parade of beautiful women through his life? A self-mocking smile tugged at his lips—was he complaining about that? Most men would envy him.

Besides, he would settle down one day, he knew. He just didn't know when. In many ways it was a shallow existence, this gilded world he'd moved up into. Few marriages lasted, and the rich often seemed to flit through life like butterflies. He thought of his own parents—both dead now—and how they'd worked hard as not-very-well-paid but hard-working public employees, doing their best to give him a good start in

life. They'd been ambivalent about his decision not to pursue an academic career after all. But a summer spent working for a property development company had opened his eyes to the huge opportunities that the new Spain afforded ambitious men. He'd have been a fool to turn that down.

His face shadowed. His parents had lived long enough to see their son begin to build his resort empire, but his father had worried continuously about the huge financial risk, and his mother had lamented the fact that he showed no interest in getting married. They had been killed in a car crash some five years earlier, leaving him alone in life. He had thrown all his energy, all his time, into building up El Paraíso.

His only break from non-stop work had been to scout for a place up in the hills, beyond the reach of the coastal developments, where he could live when he finally settled down in that mythical 'not yet' time he vaguely envisaged.

The cynical look returned. Of course he had another diversion from work as well—women. He never let them get in the way of work, but he certainly liked to relax with them.

He changed gear again. He was between women at the moment. His last had been a blonde Nordic divorcee, incredibly inventive between the sheets, though conversation with her had been pretty limited except when she'd tried to steer it round to the subject of her remarriage, making it clear that he would do nicely as husband number two. He'd balked at that, and she'd got her marching orders—not very happily, but he didn't care. Ilsa Tronberg had been in love with his money, not him.

She'd tried to hide it, of course—she had been subtle enough not to make it too obvious—but to him it had been crystal-clear. She might as well have been one of those tarts hanging off that gangster's arm, with a price stamped on her forehead.

A frown creased between his eyes. He shouldn't have thought of those women. Let alone the one that had caught his eye.

A pity, he found himself thinking. There'd been something rare about her looks, something he'd have willingly taken time to explore further—had she been anything other than what she was. His mouth hardened. Besides, she'd be stripped naked and rolling around with that bunch of gangsters by now, taking them in turns...

He slowed as the car approached an intersection. Though it was well past midnight there was traffic on the road, heading in both directions. El Paraíso was eight kilometres out of town, but the distance was interspersed with *urbarizaciones* and hotels. To get any real countryside he'd have to do what he'd be doing in a few minutes—turn off to the north and head up into the hills that backed away from the coast.

As he crossed the intersection something caught his eye on the near-side pavement just ahead of him. Or rather someone.

Automatically he felt his foot depress the brake as surprise jolted through him.

Rosalind winced painfully. Though she'd perforce discarded her ridiculous high heels about a mile back, walking along the pavement in stockings—now shredded to pieces on the hard surface—was not pain-free. At least the slit in her skirt was coming in useful at last—it meant she could actually take a decent stride in the long dress. And she still had a punishing amount of strides still to take.

Fury bit through her. Not at Yuri Rostrov and his delightful compatriots—but at herself. Fury that she could have been so totally stupid as to agree to go anywhere near them in the first place. Whatever favours Sable could expect of her, joining in a cosy little skinny-dipping hot-tub party wasn't one of them!

She could feel nausea rising—and clutching fear—at the thought of what would have happened if she hadn't refused to get in the limo. Yuri hadn't been pleased, that had been clear, but she'd stood her ground. Then, throwing some kind of coarse comment to Gyorg, Yuri had thrust one of the two girls clinging to him on to the other man. The whole lot of them had got into the limo and driven off, leaving Rosalind shaken and shivering on the tarmac.

She'd started the long tramp homewards.

A stone cut into her foot and she winced painfully. Another three miles to go—and she didn't even have the price of a taxi on her. As for buses, they were long gone. And anyone stopping to offer her a lift would hardly be doing so for altruistic reasons...

The car pulling up just in front of her drew to a halt. Warily, she eyed it, automatically arcing her path further away from the kerb. She kept on walking. Don't stop, keep walking, she told herself. If he talks to you, don't stop. Keep walking.

Even so, she felt her fingers clutch at the shoes in her hand. She could use the heels as a weapon if necessary. She felt herself tense. A man was getting out of the car. She caught the impression of height, and a tuxedo. The car, she realised, glancing covertly, was a sports job.

Flash cars were not rare on this wealthy part of the coastline, and this model was the flashest of the flash. Low-slung, sleek and moulded, it looked as if it could have taken on a Formula One car and won.

Don't stop, keep walking...

'Señorita?'

The man's voice was low.

And familiar.

Rosalind glanced sideways, unable to stop herself. She halted.

It was the man from the casino. The man who had come up to Yuri Rostrov and had made her breath catch with his stunning good looks. And who had dismissed her as a tart...

And who was now addressing her on a deserted pavement three miles from town at one in the morning.

Danger prickled at her.

She ignored him.

'Do you need a lift?'

There was an ironic tone to the voice that sent a shoot of irritation through her. After all, it was perfectly obvious that any woman walking along the main road in evening dress and stockinged feet was not doing so for the sake of her health.

But there was, of course, only one answer to make.

'No, thank you,' she said in clipped tones, and went on walking.

He fell into step beside her and placed a hand on her arm, halting her.

'Don't be ridiculous,' he told her. There was reproof in his voice, as well as that ironic amusement.

'Take your hand off me or I'll wrap my heels round your head!' Rosalind bit out between her teeth.

He let go instantly, spreading his hands wide.

'There is no need for alarm,' he said, only the note of reproof now in his voice. *'You're far more likely to be assaulted if you keep going. If you are simply going into town then I'll drive you.'*

She swivelled her head.

'Why?' she demanded challengingly.

As she looked at him full on she felt her stomach lurch. Dear God, but he was devastating! Even in the dim light the planes of his face made her breath catch. What the hell made him so good-looking? Handsome men were ten a penny here, but this one...this one pulled at her in a way that had never happened to her before. Previously she'd been pretty blasé about admiring Spanish male looks—but something about this man made her think very unacademic thoughts indeed.

His mouth—so beautifully shaped—pulled in a brief, humourless smile. Whatever he thought of the girl, he could not leave her here alone.

‘Well, let’s just say that it would not do the casino any favours if your raped and murdered body was found tomorrow morning—awkward questions might be asked about your whereabouts this evening. That wouldn’t be the kind of publicity I’d like.’

Rosalind stiffened. ‘How do you know I was at the casino?’ she demanded. Surely the man didn’t know she’d seen him earlier? He’d been paying attention only to Yuri Rostrov, not his entourage.

The man gave a slight shrug of his elegant shoulders. ‘Where else would you be coming from? There’s no other place this far out that would attract a woman like you. Besides...’ The slightest husk came into his voice, doing strange things to her nerve-endings. ‘I recognise you. Tell me—’ His voice sharpened suddenly. ‘Why did you not leave with the party you came with? Or are they finished with you? The limo was big enough!’

Her face froze as she took in his meaning, and she suppressed a violent shudder. If she’d been stupid enough to get into the limo she might very well have met the horrible fate he had thrown at her. A shaft of raw fear at her own insane recklessness, at what she had done tonight overcame her.

‘I finished with *them*!’ she shot back.

Fingers brushed along her bare back.

‘They were not to your taste, *señorita*?’ The Spaniard’s voice was low. It did extraordinary things to her insides. So did the casual brush of his fingertips along her skin.

Then, like a rush, caution lashed back.

‘Get your hands off me!’

She stepped away, glaring at him, holding her shoes in front of her as if they would protect her from him. ‘Look, Mr Flash Casino House Detective, whoever you are, just leave me alone! I’m tired, I’m fed up, and I’m a long way from home. So shove off and leave me in peace.’

She twisted away and started to head off again. But even as she took her first painful stride the sole of her foot landed on a particularly sharp stone and she gave a yelp, stopping in her tracks. The man was at her side in an instant.

‘You’ll cut your feet to shreds,’ he admonished grimly. ‘If you have the slightest sense you’ll accept my offer of a lift back into town. Believe me,’ he added, his mouth tightening, ‘you’ll be safer with me than out here on your own. Not everyone who stops for a beautiful woman, *señorita*, is as well intentioned. And besides—’ there was that note of ironic mocking humour again ‘—you are hardly likely to get the offer of a lift in a faster car...’

Rosalind cast a baleful look at the low-slung beast, paused at the kerb like a crouching tiger. ‘OK, so you’ve borrowed the boss’s car and you want to show it off. Fine.’ A sudden resolve snapped through her. Surely to heaven she would be safe enough with the house detective from the El Paraíso casino? It was one of the most exclusive resorts on the coast, and its security guards could hardly compromise their jobs by assaulting tourists, could they? And she was just *so* tired, and *so* fed up...not to mention her feet were agony...

She limped across to the car, yanking open the door and thumping herself down into the soft leather seats. She dropped her shoes on to the floor and leant back, lifting her chin imperiously.

‘Café Carmen in Calle de las Americas—it runs up from the old harbour. And step on it, will you?’

CHAPTER TWO

FOR a moment there was a tension so strong it was palpable. Then, with a sharp gesture, her door was slammed shut and she could see the Spaniard crossing around the long, lean front of the car to get into the driver's seat. As he eased his tall frame into the low seat Rosalind stole a look at him. His face was set, as if he did not like—*definitely* did not like—the way she had spoken to him.

Well, tough, she thought. She hadn't asked him to stop and give her a lift—and she'd just spent the worst evening of her life. As the man engaged the engine and pulled out into the road with a powerful roar, she felt a long, silent shudder go through her. Tonight had been more than just the worst evening of her life. If she had actually climbed into that limo...

'What is it?'

The accented voice cut into her fear.

'Nothing,' she gritted, and tried to make herself relax into her seat.

She stared doggedly ahead at the road, refusing to look at the man sitting so close beside her. She could see from the corner of her eye the way his lean, brown hand curved over the gearstick. His fingers were long, with white nails, beautifully manicured. The cuff of his dress shirt gleamed palely against the darkness of his skin and the blackness of his tuxedo jacket. She found herself wanting to twist her head slightly, so she could look at him properly, but refused to do so. He was giving her a lift. That was all. He was a member of casino security and he wouldn't want a breath of scandal attached to him if a customer—however undesirable—came to any harm on the way back to town.

'A word of advice, *señorita*—'

The Spaniard's voice made her start, and her eyes flew to him after all. She wished they hadn't. Not only did her insides give that funny turn again—the way they had when she'd first set eyes on him in the casino, and then again when he'd accosted her on the pavement—but the expression on his face made her quail.

'Men like Rostrov are dangerous. Perhaps you think you can handle him, but be warned—your life would be of no account to him whatsoever. So, if you happen to hear or see any dealings of his he prefers not to make public, he won't blink an eyelid before having you killed to keep you quiet.'

Rosalind stared. '*What?*'

'You heard me.' His voice had lost not a shade of its grimness. 'Gangsters like Rostrov don't get fussy about bitplayers like you.'

'*Gangsters?*'

The Spaniard glanced across at her as he changed gear.

'You don't like the word? Tough.'

'Yuri Rostrov isn't a *gangster*! He's just some flash Eastern European businessman who's made a success of himself since communism ended!'

The man's mouth thinned. 'Yes—out of drugs, illegal arms, extortion...'

As Cesar glanced at the girl's face a shaft of exasperation went through him. She was staring at him as if he was mad. A hard smile twisted at his lips. 'Can you really be that naïve, *querida*?'

'I didn't know they were gangsters!'

Could her shock be genuine? Cesar wondered. If that were true then he was doubly glad he'd acted instinctively and pulled up to offer her a lift. No woman dressed like her should be out walking at this time of night, even if she hadn't been at his casino. But had it just been a gentlemanly instinct to stop for her? Or had his libido been involved in that instant decision as well?

Close up, she was as stunning as he'd thought her at the casino—even if she was done up like a *putana*! But even dressed like this she was having an effect on him—a powerful one...

'How do you know they're gangsters?' she demanded, interrupting his thoughts, which were wandering off in a direction that was obviously impractical. Whether or not she'd known they were gangsters, the girl was still obviously a tart—and, however stunning she was, he wouldn't be soiling his hands on her.

He gave her an old-fashioned look. 'I know everyone who comes into the casino.'

'Of course.' She shrugged. 'It's your job. House detective, or whatever you are.'

Cesar dropped one hand from the steering wheel and reached inside a glove compartment. Drawing out a business card, he handed it silently to her. She glanced at it in a fleeting street light.

Cesar Montarez, she read. *Desarrollos El Pacuso*.

She looked blank.

'I make a point, *señorita*,' Cesar Montarez said softly, 'of knowing everyone who comes into my casino. I have a comprehensive database—a necessity in these fraudulent and financially uncertain times. Alas, some gamblers suffer from a compulsive habit that their financial situation does not support. And some, such as our mutual acquaintance Yuri Rostrov, spend money whose origins draw the attention of the police. Such gamblers are not valued customers of mine.'

She frowned. 'Yours?'

'Mine,' he agreed.

Her frown deepened. He saw her glancing both at him and at the luxurious interior of the car.

'It's *your* casino?'

'Indeed. I own all the El Paraíso resorts,' he assented smoothly.

He waited for the flash in her eyes as he revealed he was a rich man. But all she said was, 'I thought you were the house detective. I suppose I should have thought it odd that you were driving a flash car like this—I thought you'd just borrowed it.'

'No. It's mine.' He paused minutely. 'Do you like it?'

'It's very nice,' said Rosalind politely. She knew men and their cars were a serious item, and that they took offence if you did not admire them.

A laugh broke from him. He hadn't meant it to, but she'd got one out of him. He felt a wave of relaxation go through him. He didn't know why, exactly, but there was something about her total lack of interest in a car costing over two hundred thousand euros that was incredibly refreshing.

And incredibly unexpected. Most women he knew drooled over the car, just as they drooled over him.

And a girl like this one, who practically had a sign over her head saying ‘Sexually available if paid’, should have been foaming at the mouth for him now she knew just how rich he was.

So why wasn’t she? And why hadn’t she stuck with her ‘escorts’ for the evening?

‘Why didn’t you go on with Rostrov?’ he asked suddenly.

She tensed. ‘Because I’m not that stupid!’ she retorted. ‘I might have been stupid enough not to realise he was a gangster, but I’m not stupid enough to get into a limo with him and go back for a spot of cosy communal hot-tubbing!’

His brows drew together. ‘Forgive me,’ he said in a soft voice that made her flesh crawl, ‘but I rather thought that was the object of the exercise.’

Rosalind’s face set. OK, so he thought her a tart. She couldn’t blame him. But she was damned if he was going to think her a slut as well as a naïve idiot who couldn’t spot a gangster when she was plastered against one!

‘Well, it wasn’t! The reason I was with them was because...because I was doing Yuri Rostrov’s girlfriend a favour. She’s down with a bug, and she didn’t want some other woman moving in on her rich squeeze. So I was there babysitting him—*just* in public—that’s all! When he and his mates wanted to make the party private I called time, OK? They didn’t like it, and I ended up heading for home on foot.’

He frowned. ‘You should have asked the doorman to order you a taxi.’

‘Taxis cost money, Señor Montarez,’ she answered tightly.

‘You only like to spend other people’s money, then?’ he riposted. There was a clear jibe in his voice.

‘You have no call to say that,’ she replied, even more tightly.

He shrugged. ‘The coast is packed with girls looking for men to spend money on them.’

‘Well, I’m not one of them!’ she retorted.

A grim smile parted his mouth. ‘If you don’t want people to make such an assumption about you then you had better not hang around with the likes of Yuri Rostrov—even if he were just the legitimate businessman you say you thought he was.’

‘I told you, I was doing a friend a favour!’ she snapped hotly.

He glanced down at her, eyes flickering.

‘Indeed,’ he murmured.

His blatant disbelief galled her.

‘Look, Señor Montarez,’ she launched, determined he should take that cynical look off his face when she defended herself, ‘I’m a naïve idiot, like you said, but I’m *not* that kind of girl—even if you have every reason to think I am!’

‘Then I suggest,’ he said sardonically, ‘that you don’t keep company with types like Rostrov in future—or do any of his girlfriends a favour!’

‘Believe me, I won’t,’ she answered tightly. ‘But the fact that I did doesn’t make me a tart! So you can just damn well stop looking down that haughty nose of yours at me. I didn’t ask for a lift, and I didn’t ask for you to lecture me on Eastern European gangsters—though I accept that you meant it kindly. But your concern is not necessary. Believe me, I’m never going to go near Yuri Rostrov again, and I’m never going to step foot inside your precious casino again. So before you move on to what I’m sure is going to be a friendly warning not to pollute your deluxe resort, you can save your breath.’

‘That,’ said the man beside her, ‘is a pity. That you do not intend to set foot in my casino again,’ he clarified.

Satisfaction was surging through him. Her protestations had been so vehement, her obvious affront at being thought—and called—a tart so genuine, that he could not now disbelieve her.

And if she really hadn’t known Rostrov was a gangster, and hadn’t been having sex with him or intending to, then—oh, then the deep, powerful impulse that his libido was urging him to could finally be responded to. And that, Cesar thought, was a very good feeling indeed. He could pursue her himself—starting right now.

Rosalind stared at him, astonished by what he had just said. It was totally unexpected. He actually *wanted* her to visit the casino again?

Why?

They had reached the town now and were heading for the old port area, the streets narrowing.

As he turned a corner Cesar smiled across at her. Rosalind felt her insides clench. There was something about the way he smiled, something about the way his long, long lashes swept down over his eyes, something about the way the dim light etched the planes of his face, that just made her feel weak and breathless.

There was nothing cynical or sardonic about this smile.

All it was, was...sexy.

She felt weak all over again, and even more breathless.

As if he knew, he said, in a voice like silk, ‘I should like you to come to my casino again—but this time as my guest, Señorita...?’ He paused expectantly.

Numbly, she supplied her name. ‘Foster. Rosalind Foster.’

‘Señorita Foster,’ he murmured, and she heard the hard syllables of her name melt in his liquid accent, sending another little quiver through her.

He turned back to steering the low-slung car carefully down the narrowing street, past the cars. Above the throaty purr of the powerful engine came a burst of noise from a bar. Rosalind could feel her heart slamming in her chest, and her fingers clenched over her evening bag. This was mad! She’d had the worst evening of her life, her feet were shredded, and she’d nearly ended up in the middle of an orgy with a bunch of gangsters! But, for all that, something was bubbling through her veins as if champagne had been injected into her.

And all because of the man sitting next to her—the most breathtaking man she’d ever seen, ever breathed the same air with...

And he’d just said he wanted to see her again...

Unfortunately, there was only one answer she could give.

‘I’m afraid that’s not possible.’

Her voice sounded clipped. Closed. Cesar felt surprise ripple through him. Women didn’t turn him down. At least not in a prim little voice like this English female. If they ever turned him down it was in a way that made it blazingly obvious that they were simply playing hard to get—part of the ritual flirtation that some women liked to go through so they could feel they weren’t just falling into his bed like a ripe peach.

But they always fell in the end...

This one would, too.

There was no reason for her not to.

She was responsive to him; that was obvious. For all her indignation, the signs were indisputable. He found favour in her eyes, he could tell. It was a reaction he was uniquely familiar with. And, though his wealth now made women even more eager, he also knew that when the air shimmered with electricity the way it was doing now it had nothing to do with his bank balance.

But something far more powerful.

He felt anticipation surge through him. He would make his move on her now the impediment of her supposed association with Rostrov was out of the way.

As he nosed the car forward he glanced across at her. The dress—obscene, but forgivable now—was still showing a generous amount of cleavage, and his gaze lingered momentarily on the lush swell of her breasts. Oh, yes, he could definitely indulge himself with her! Most definitely!

Right now?

Conscience tugged at him. Many men, he knew, did not require extensive acquaintance with a woman before bedding her. Nor did many women before bedding a man. Some were happy with nothing more than a couple of glasses of wine before the greatest physical intimacies of each other's bodies could be happily enjoyed to mutual pleasure. But for himself he preferred a little more subtlety. He liked to gather the flavour of a woman first, enjoy the process of seduction, letting the anticipation mount. Both knew the final destination, but the journey there was enjoyable in its own right.

All the same...with this one...

He really, really wouldn't mind cutting the journey short...

He was tempted—yes, very tempted. He hadn't set eyes on so stunning a woman for a long time, and after having thought her soiled goods, the discovery that she wasn't gangster trash after all made her all the more attractive—for having once been off the menu.

And the sooner he got her out of that atrocity of a dress the better...

The car reached the end of the street. Calle de las Americas was to the right, but it was going to be a tight turn. He could see the sign for the Café Carmen halfway down the street—not a prepossessing establishment, but typical of tourist cafés in this part of town. It wasn't, however, the kind of place he'd care to leave his car overnight, even if he could find a space—which was unlikely, given the nose-to-tail cars pulled up over the narrow pavement. Of course, he mused, he could always simply tell her to collect her toothbrush, and then they could both head up to his *castillo* up in the hills...

Would she come? He gave an inward smile. He could persuade her; he was sure. He hadn't reached the age of thirty-four without knowing when a woman was attracted to him. She was aware of him, it stood out a mile—from the way she held her body, just so, to the way her glance kept slipping away from him every time he caught it. As for the frisson caused by him having accused her of being a tart—well, that could be very erotic, too. She might not want to think of herself as a tart—and nor did he, of course—but the accusation had made her hyper-aware of the sexual role he had already cast her in. Desire was already shimmering between them like petrol vapour. It would sheet into flame the moment he induced flashpoint!

But—should he light the touchpaper tonight? Or savour the anticipation of deferring the pleasurable moment? Both had their attractions, but which should he choose?

'This is fine. Let me out here. You'll never get this thing round the corner.'

Her voice cut through his reverie. It still had that clipped, closed tone to it. Cesar gave another inward smile. English girls could be like that sometimes. All that 'don't touch' stuff that they sometimes put out...

until you simply reached through it and touched them—as, of course, they actually wanted to be touched all along. And if this English rose didn't want him to touch, then she shouldn't have shimmered sexual awareness at him from the first time she'd laid eyes on him, those green eyes hanging on his face as he'd sorted out Rostrov.

No, it was mutual all right. And now, very satisfactorily, there was no reason in the world not to enjoy that attraction to its ultimate limit.

However clipped a tone she adopted...

He paused the car, holding it in neutral, and turned to her properly.

Dios, but she really was something! The dim light was softening her make-up, simply making her eyes look huge and dark, and the wind off the sea had taken most of the excess volume out of her hair, so that it simply flowed down her back in wild, rippling waves. She had turned to him almost fully, and as his eyes met hers he felt a shaft of desire stab at him. Oh, yes, she was aware of him all right! Her gaze was flickering, trying to move away, but unable to drag itself from his.

He smiled.

'Do you really want to get out?' he asked softly.

Rosalind tensed. Tensed even more than she had already. Something was leaping between them, had been ever since he had casually invited her to his casino again...

Some barrier had come down—the barrier of him thinking her so promiscuous—and the realisation was sending champagne coursing through her bloodstream again. The scorn that had been in his eyes when she'd been with Yuri was quite absent now. Now all that was in his eyes was...

Desire.

That was it.

She might have not dated for ever, but she was not so stupid she could not spot desire in a man's eyes.

And such a man...

The tumbling feeling came again in her stomach. It shouldn't be there—she didn't have time for it. She had much more to worry about than whether a man who made her jaw fall open had the slightest awareness of her existence as a woman.

But this was coming at her even when she didn't want it to. When she didn't have time for it. Didn't have space for it in her life. Her life was focused on one thing only—money. Earning it—day by day, week by week, month by month. Until she was free of the burden crippling her.

She didn't have time for romance.

Even with a man like Cesar Montarez, who took her breath away with his dark, desiring eyes.

Asking her if she really wanted to get out of his car...

What would happen if I didn't?

The thought took hold. *What would happen if I stayed right here?*

She pressed her lips together, trying to drag her gaze away from those long-lashed, waiting dark eyes. And failing completely.

She knew what would happen if she stayed in the car—it didn't take a clairvoyant to tell her that. She'd take a one-way journey into his bed...

No! That was impossible. It didn't matter that she was sitting beside a man who made the breath crush from her lungs, who set her blood singing, her skin aching with awareness, aching for him to touch her.

As his eyes were touching her. She could feel her pupils dilate, watched with dread fascination how his were doing the same as she went on looking into his eyes, feeling them touch her. She could smell the maleness of him, mingled with the leather from the seats, a clean, male smell touched with a heady aromatic echo of aftershave. Not overpowering, but oh, so potent.

Time was slowing down. She could feel it even as she went on sitting there, her hands clasped over her evening bag, her eyes gazing at him. As his arm curled over the steering wheel as he half twisted his lean body towards her, waiting for her answer.

'I can't,' she heard herself whisper. 'I can't.'

A tiny smile tugged at his mouth. She felt her insides churn again.

'Try,' said Cesar, and slid his hand beneath her hair, touching the nape of her neck with the tips of his fingers as he drew her mouth towards his. 'Try.'

His kiss was bliss. Rosalind's eyes fluttered closed—as if to shut out both what she was doing and to savour it more fully.

His mouth was warm, his lips a tantalising, oh-so-skilful blend of soft and hard, teasing...and tasting.

She felt weakness wash through her—weakness and sweetness, like honey. Her mouth moved beneath his, opened beneath his, and she gave a little sigh, all unheard as his tongue caressed hers, widening her mouth as he moved with slow sensuality.

Time slowed, and stopped. Stopped until, with an emptying ache, he drew back from her.

'That,' said Cesar, sliding his hand away from the nape of her neck so that he could touch her swollen lower lip with his fingertip, 'was a very good try, *querida*. But...' his voice husked as he bent his head towards her again '...you might do even better next time...'

She jerked back. Straightening like a ramrod.

'No!'

The rejection was sharp. Absolute.

Cesar stilled. Did she mean it? It sounded genuine. All too genuine.

If so, it was completely at odds with the way she had responded to him seconds ago. Then she had been soft and honeyed, breathing in his desire with her own. But now she was pulled back against the passenger door as if he were pointing a gun at her.

'Thank you very much for the lift. I have to go now!'

The words came out in a scrambled rush. They were accompanied by a jerky fumbling for her shoes, and then an equally jerky fumbling for the handle to the door.

He caught her wrist. She tensed like a deer.

'I don't want you to go.'

It was true—he didn't. Something about this woman was making him want to hold on to her, not risk losing her.

His voice was low, and oh-so-persuasive. She felt her breath catch again. But a moment later her voice came to her rescue.

‘Yes, well, that’s pretty obvious. But if you’d wanted payment for the car ride you should have made it clear earlier. Then I could have turned down the lift.’

His face hardened. He was angered, she knew, but she didn’t care. All she cared about was getting out of this car. Fast.

‘Don’t behave like the tart I took you for!’ His reprimand was sharp, and made her flinch. But she was panicking—badly—and just needed to get out. Because if she didn’t get out of this car right now...

‘OK, so it was just a nice little goodnight kiss. Fine. Well, goodnight, then, Señor Montarez. Thank you kindly for the lift, and I hope gangsters never cross your threshold again. I won’t either.’

Her voice was breathless again, but she was trying to go for closure as fast as she could—and then get out.

‘Why?’

She stared. ‘Why what?’

‘Why won’t you cross my threshold again?’

There was a genuine question in his voice, as though her refusal made no sense to him. The anger had gone—but not his hold on her wrist. His clasp was warm, and the blood in the veins beneath his fingers seemed to be heating. She ought to pull away, but she didn’t quite have the strength. Not quite.

‘Why?’ she reiterated. ‘Well, it’s obvious. It’s not the sort of place I hang around—way out of my league. I haven’t got any money to gamble, and I’ve already told you I don’t make a habit of going there with men!’

‘I am very glad to hear it. The only man I want to see you with there is me, Señorita Foster.’

He was laughing at her. She could tell. It did strange things to her. Made her angry. Made her breathless.

She pulled her wrist free.

‘Well, it really doesn’t matter what you want, because you are not going to get it! I’m not a tart—and I’m not a one-night stand either. So there is obviously no point whatsoever in me having anything more to do with you, Señor Montarez—either tonight or any other night. Sorry, but there it is. I know a lot of English girls out here might act differently, but I’ve been here nearly three years and I don’t do one-night stands.’ She took another deep breath, and a surge of relief went through her as she finally found the door handle and managed to make the door open. ‘So, like I said, thanks for the lift and all that—and goodnight!’

She scrambled out of the car, refusing to look at him, trying to make herself feel indignant that he’d made such a blatant pass at her, but feeling only that she was walking away from something...someone...that would never, ever come her way again. But then she was slamming the car door and hobbling away down the cobbled street, heading for the precious haven that was the side entrance to the café.

Like daggers in her back she could feel the car’s headlights pin her, and it wasn’t until she was safely inside the door, and shooting all the bolts on it methodically, that she heard the distinctive noise of the sports car’s engine firing up again. As the subdued roar ebbed away into silence she stood there at the foot of the narrow stairs, with the peeling walls, and tried to work out whether she felt sick with relief—or just sick with regret.

Then, hitching her skirt free of her ankles, she started to climb the stairs to her room above the café, trying not to remember what it had felt like to be kissed by such a man...

‘Cesar Montarez. *Cesar Montarez.*’ The fluid syllables rolled over Rosalind’s tongue, sounding exotic, enticing.

Like the man whose name it was.

As she methodically stripped the layers of make-up off her face his name danced through her brain. And the image of his tall, feline body, his lean, sculpted face, haunted her.

She felt breathless, as though a steamroller had run over her. Her adrenaline was high, she could tell, her breathing shallow.

‘Stop this!’

The adjuration hissed from her mouth. What on earth was the point of thinking about a gorgeous Spaniard who had drawn her mouth to his and kissed her as she had never been kissed before? Inflamed her senses as no man had ever done before?

No point at all. The likes of Cesar Montarez, who doubtless collected women like pearls on a string, were not for her.

And besides, she thought grimly, there was no time in her life for romance. Or even dalliance.

Only for work and earning money. Endlessly earning money...

So that little by little, grain by grain, week by week, she could repay the crippling debt she owed.

Slowly despair filled her, as familiar as it was dismaying. How, *how* had she got into such a hideous, hideous mess—owing thousands, *thousands* of euros?

Her eyes shadowed, pierced with sudden sorrow. No, not mad. Not mad at all.

Her chin lifted. She would do it all again—*all*—at the drop of a hat. Instantly, without the slightest hesitation. None at all.

Slowly Rosalind went back to wiping the make-up from her eyes, suddenly wet with tears. Familiar tears. Tears that washed away all thoughts of her crippling debts, all thoughts of everything. Even of Cesar Montarez.

‘Ros! What the hell did you think you were playing at?’

Sable’s voice was shrill.

‘I asked you to babysit him! Not hand him on a plate to that cow Lena! Honestly, I really didn’t think you’d let me down like that!’

Rosalind had known Sable wouldn’t be thrilled when she discovered that she’d walked out on Yuri. Sure enough, the other girl, who’d surfaced from her bout of sickness, was now sitting up at the café counter, letting rip.

‘Yes, well,’ said Rosalind repressively, glad that the café was empty, since Sable was hardly restraining her voice, ‘the evening got cut short. You told me Yuri usually spent the night gambling, and I could just slope off when the casino finally closed at dawn. But something happened and Yuri left soon after midnight.’

‘You should have stuck with him!’ Sable hissed.

Rosalind leant forward across the counter, setting aside the cup she’d been drying.

‘They were going back to his hotel. They were planning a spot of communal clothes-free hot-tubbing. That wasn’t in the deal and you know it! So I walked!’

Sable's pretty face set. 'Thanks a bunch, Ros. He spent the night with Lena and now she's crowing about it—says she's got him again tonight! Well,' she went on viciously, 'we'll see about that! I'm not losing Yuri to her—she can make do with that oaf Gyorg. But Yuri's *mine*!'

Rosalind said nothing. They were welcome to each other—she wanted nothing more to do with them.

Except that cutting Sable out of her life wasn't an option. Not yet. She was bound to the other girl by a lot more than the fact they were both ex-pats living out here.

She sighed inwardly. She had no right to feel hostile to Sable—just the reverse. If it hadn't been for Sable she dreaded to think what would have happened. Six months ago the loan company had turned really ugly on her, upping her interest rate exorbitantly, threatening to make it impossible for her to ever get out of debt for years and years, however hard she worked. She'd been desperate.

Sable had been a godsend.

'Look, I'll lend you the money, OK? I'm flush right now and I can afford it,' she'd told Rosalind, who had been sick with worry. 'Then you can get those loan sharks off your back and pay me back instead at the old interest rate.'

Rosalind had seized on Sable's offer with both hands and boundless gratitude. But, even paying the other girl back as much as she could afford every month, it was still going to take for ever to clear the full amount. Sable, of course, thought her mad not to take the easy way out and get some rich, besotted bloke to fork out for her.

'I can't believe you prefer slaving away like a skivvy when you could have it so easy!' she'd told her a hundred times.

She said it again, as she put her bad mood aside and cadged a cup of coffee from Rosalind.

'Didn't last night show you what you're missing out on, Ros? That Paradise place is fantastic! I went there once with another guy—I hope Yuri takes me there tonight! Once I get rid of Lena,' she added darkly.

Rosalind did not like to tell her that she doubted Yuri Rostrov would be allowed into the casino again. She glanced at Sable. Did she realise Rostrov was a gangster, not just a new-rich, post-communism businessman?

Somehow, knowing just how streetwise the other British girl was, Rosalind could not believe she didn't know. Perhaps she just didn't like to think of herself as a gangster's moll...

Anyway, it was nothing to do with her any more, and she was just grateful for that. She was sorry she'd let Sable down—but the evening had gone totally belly-up. And even gratitude to Sable for having lent her so much money when she was so desperate could not make her join in with the other girl's amoral lifestyle. Let alone go within a mile of her gangster boyfriend.

A shudder went through her yet again, which she suppressed for Sable's sake. It wasn't her place to judge Sable.

Some customers entered the café, and Rosalind turned her attention to them. Soon after Sable left, telling Rosalind she had a heavy-duty session of making herself look gorgeous enough to get Yuri back before Lena got her claws totally into him.

Relieved that she had gone, but feeling bad about feeling relieved, Rosalind got back to work.

But as she rushed backwards and forwards, single-handedly serving customers, preparing food and clearing up afterwards, she had a sudden, searing memory of sitting in a flash low-slung car with the most fabulous man in the world next to her, leaning towards her to kiss her...

A glass slipped from her fingers and smashed on the floor.

Along with her memory.

Cesar Montarez wasn't for her.

But he continued to haunt her dreams—sleeping and waking. It still seemed fantastic—that a man as fabulous as Cesar Montarez should have wanted to pursue his acquaintance with her. To see her again. To invite her to his casino.

Her good sense bit back, all the same.

And just why, my girl, does he want to see you again, pray? To offer you a one-night tour of his bed, that's all! You told him you didn't do one-night stands, and that was that. It doesn't matter than he's the most fantastic kisser you've ever known. He just wants an easy lay. Don't be it!

Her jaw tightened, her heart falling. No, it didn't matter how much her heart skipped a beat just thinking of Cesar Montarez. There was simply no point thinking about him.

Yet, even while her good sense told her that, she still found herself dreaming of him, longing for him.

The thought of seeing him again tempted her unbearably.

You could take a night off and go back, couldn't you? It would just be to see him again, that's all. Nothing else. Just to look at him one last time.

Her good sense bit back again, promptly.

Yeah, right—looking at him! That's all you want to do? Liar! You want to do a whole lot more than look—and so does he! So wise up!

She went on mopping the café floor before she opened up for breakfast. Señor Guarde the proprietor would call in today, she knew. It was his day for checking out the café and collecting receipts. He owned quite a few cafés in town, and, whilst she had nothing in particular against him, she was aware that because he provided her with free accommodation she was poorly paid for the work she did. And she was a good worker—diligent and responsible.

But then she had to be. She had a mountain of debt to repay.

A caustic smile, bereft of humour, tugged at her. She thought of the incredibly flash car she'd come back in the other night. God knows what it had cost, but to Cesar Montarez it was just a toy! How on earth had she thought him just a house detective? she wondered. The designer tux ought to have told her differently, let alone that look about him of deep, sleek assurance that only wealth could confer.

I'm thinking about him *again*, she realised exasperatedly. Can I not get the wretched man out of my head?

No—and you don't want to either! You want to go on thinking about him. Dreaming about him. Even though it's completely pointless! Even though you know perfectly well that even if you did go back to El Paraíso he would simply enjoy you for one night and that would be that.

With renewed vigour she attacked the tiled floor.

But you'd enjoy him too...

A treacherous voice from the part of her that had nothing whatsoever to do with good sense whispered temptingly in her ear.

And what's so wrong with enjoying yourself?

You can't afford it, my girl! answered her good sense robustly. The only reason you're sighing like a fool over that man is that you want to run away from what you're up against. But you can't. You got yourself into this situation with eyes open and you know full well you would do the same thing all over again. This is the situation, and you're stuck in it. The only way out is to repay Sable, little by little, the way you are doing. You can't run away, and you certainly can't afford to indulge in idiotic daydreams about millionaire Spaniards with eyelashes like silk and a mouth to die for...

With a determined twist of the mop-head in the bucket, Rosalind went on cleaning the floor.

It was in the post-lunch lull, when the Spanish were taking their siestas, that Sable turned up. Rosalind was doing the books for the café, ordering supplies and nibbling at a bowl of *tapas*. An English couple, ignoring the siesta, were drinking coffee at a table on the pavement, but the inside of the café was empty.

Sable swung in through the door, wearing a very short, tight pink skirt and an off-the-shoulder clinging white top. Her bleached blonde hair was pushed off her face with a pair of sunglasses that glittered with diamanté frames.

She swayed up to the bar in her high heels, her figure waving provocatively in her habitual fashion. Rosalind spotted the male half of the English couple on the pavement goggle at Sable through the window before his girlfriend yanked his attention back to her.

Sable perched on a high stool, crossed her legs, and set her pink patent leather bag on the surface of the counter.

'Hi,' said Rosalind. 'How's things?'

There was a curious air about Sable. She was looking buoyant, but slightly chary as well.

'Good and—not so good. Well, could be all good—if you help me out.' The other girl eyed her straightly, in a way that started a bad feeling at the bottom of Rosalind's stomach.

'What is it?' she asked, setting aside her order book. She looked at the other girl. 'Um—did you dispose of Lena?'

Sable smirked, diverted. She flicked her fingers, her long pink-varnished nails looking momentarily like talons.

'Oh, yes,' she said, with a note of definite satisfaction.

Rosalind forbore to ask just how Sable had disposed of her rival.

But Sable was speaking again, and there was a strange expression on her face.

'The thing is, Ros, even though I've peeled Lena off Yuri, it's still a bit dodgy for me.'

'How come?' She didn't really want to know, but that bad feeling was still sitting in the pit of her stomach. Sable was here for a purpose, and that made her wary.

'Well, you see, the thing is... Yuri's a bit... well... upset about the other night.'

The bad feeling in Rosalind's stomach grew.

'He really didn't like being walked away from. People don't do that to him. Especially girls.'

Cold started to pinch at Rosalind.

'Well, I did explain to him,' she began carefully, 'that I'd only agreed to go to the casino with him—nothing else.'

Sable fluttered her hand. ‘Yes, well, you see—that didn’t go down too well, to be honest. The thing is...’ She took a breath. ‘Yuri—um—well, he’s a total doll most of the time—a real sweetie—but he does like to get his own way.’ She gave a forced laugh. ‘Well, what man doesn’t? But the problem is...’ She spread her hand. ‘Yuri feels he’s sort of—well, lost face, I guess. You know—you flouncing off in a huff and all that.’

‘I don’t really see it as “flouncing off in a huff”, Sable,’ Rosalind said, even more carefully. ‘I was invited back for some naked hot-tubbing. Even I know what that would have ended up as! That guy Gyorg was all over me! And it was pretty obvious what he expected! I don’t do sex like that—’

‘You don’t do sex, period!’ Sable interrupted. ‘And it’s totally unnatural! Anyway, that’s not the point, Ros. The point is, Yuri is definitely miffed—and right now he’s taking it out on me! I mean, I could really, really do with some new clothes—I haven’t got a thing to wear any more! But Yuri’s playing tightwad. Basically, he’s sulking—and it’s because you flou—walked out...the other evening. He’s making me take the rap for it!’

Rosalind swallowed. What the hell was Sable after?

She found out a moment later.

‘The thing is,’ said Sable again, eyeing Rosalind straightly, ‘Yuri is the best guy I’ve had in ages! He really knows how to spend his money—and I seriously don’t want to screw it up with him! But there’s a hell of a lot of competition out there for him! I’ve really got to pull out the stops to make sure it’s me he sticks with! That’s why I thought I was being so clever the other night—sending you along to babysit him. I didn’t realise,’ she went on darkly, ‘it would be such a disaster.’

‘Yes, well,’ answered Rosalind feelingly, ‘neither did I. I was totally out of my depth, Sable, and I got scared and ran. I can’t handle stuff like that. Look,’ she temporised, ‘I’m sorry—I really am. I owe you so much—you really saved me, and I’m really grateful to you—but I *can’t* live the life you lead, Sable! Some can, some can’t. That’s it.’

‘OK,’ agreed Sable, ‘I admit I like sex a lot—always have done! But listen, Ros, all you really need is *one* rich bloke! That’s all. He’d get you out of this dump so fast you wouldn’t see daylight.’ She gave a sudden giggle. ‘Well, you probably wouldn’t see daylight anyway. If I were a bloke I’d lock you in my bedroom and never let you out! Oh, Ros.’ She gave a frustrated wail. ‘*Why* don’t you lighten up more? You could have such *fun*!’

It was a familiar argument, and one that could only end the same way it always did.

Rosalind looked away. ‘I won’t sleep my way out of debt, Sable—that’s all there is to it.’

The other girl gave an exasperated sigh. ‘You’re wasting your youth, Ros! You’re wasting it slaving away like a drudge. It’s a time that will never come back—and you’ll have nothing to show for it. Not even memories. Zilch. Time’s ticking on—God, thirty’s on its way. Looks don’t last for ever! I should know! And there’s another bunch of younger girls treading on my heels already! I’ve got to score while I can.’ Her voice changed, taking on an urgent note. ‘That’s why I’ve just *got* to get things sorted with Yuri! I’ve got to get him sweet on me again—I mean, really sweet. So...’ She took a deep breath and looked Rosalind straight in the eyes. ‘That’s why I want you to come out with us tonight! It would sort of say sorry to him for walking out, you know.’

Rosalind’s answer was an automatic reflex.

‘No way!’

‘Ros—’

‘Sable, no. I can’t. I’m sorry. I just don’t want to go anywhere near Yuri Rostrov.’ She paused minutely. She still didn’t know if Sable knew that her boyfriend was a fully paid-up gangster, not some flash-cash businessman, and that therefore the very last thing on earth she intended doing was going anywhere near him

again. She had a pretty grim feeling that Sable must know—but presumably she liked to keep to the sanitised version, and Rosalind didn't particularly want to explain how it was she had found out that Yuri Rostrov was *not* a legitimate businessman.

Tentatively, Rosalind began, 'Sable, look, I really do appreciate how much I owe you, but—'

The other girl cut across her. 'No. You don't.' There was something wary in the way Sable spoke. Rosalind frowned. Sable went on. 'You don't owe me. You owe Yuri.'

'What?'

Sable looked uncomfortable. 'The thing is, a few months ago I got a bit carried away when we were out gambling—I lost Yuri quite a lot of money. He wasn't too thrilled. I wasn't going to be able to pay him back any time soon, so I...well, I said I knew someone who owed me more than I owed him, and he said, OK, I could transfer the debt to him and pass him the repayments you make. Which is what I've been doing. So, technically speaking, it's him you owe the money to.'

'I owe seven thousand euros to Yuri Rostrov?' Rosalind's voice was a sick thread.

Sable gave a would-be nonchalant shrug. 'It isn't really such a big deal, Ros. You keep paying me the installments and Yuri's happy. Anyway, the reason I told you was to show you why it's a good idea for both of us to keep him sweet. That's why I want you to come along tonight. He'll get his precious face back, and then he'll stop sulking at me. Don't worry, I'll make sure you get to do a runner before the clock strikes midnight and you turn into fallen woman!'

There was a waspish note to her voice, but Rosalind wasn't listening. Her mind had blanked out—only one thought sat in it, occupying the total space in a terrifying, obliterating way.

She owed seven thousand euros to a gangster.

Dear God, wasn't it bad enough being thousands and thousands of euros in debt? Money it was taking her for ever to repay. But to find that she owed it to Yuri Rostrov...

In her head she heard Cesar Montarez's warning echo. *Men like Rostrov are dangerous—he won't blink an eyelid before having you killed...*

She wanted to give a hysterical laugh, but fought it down. She had to stay calm. She had to.

But she could feel the horror rising in her throat.

Sable was talking again. 'So, I'll come along here this evening, and I'll lend you that outfit again, and then we'll meet up with Yuri at his hotel and—'

'I can't.'

Rosalind's voice was sharp.

'What do you mean?'

'I can't. Not tonight.'

'Ros, the café can close early for once. I need you to help me out—I really do.'

But Rosalind was immune to the mix of pleading and impatience in Sable's voice. All she knew was that the last, the very last thing on earth she could do was go anywhere near a man who was a ruthless, murderous gangster with a taste for naked hot-tubbing in his suite, whose grotesque side-kick had been all over her and to whom she owed seven thousand crippling, terrifying euros...

'I can't,' she said again. 'You see...' Her brain floundered wildly, desperately trying to think of a reason to put Sable off. And where the words came from she simply didn't know, but they did all the same.

‘You see, I’ve got a date tonight.’

CHAPTER THREE

ROSALIND could feel the nervous tension in her stomach as she got out of the taxi and walked up to the huge pillared front of the Casino El Paraíso.

Was she mad to be here?

It had been impulse—sheer, terrified impulse—that had made her blurt out to Sable that she couldn't meet up with Yuri Rostrov and company that night because she had a date. Sable had immediately wanted to know more—clearly thinking she was just stringing her a line—and with huge reluctance Rosalind had told her that it was someone she had encountered at El Paraíso who had made a play for her.

Sable's eyes had widened. 'Rich?'

Rosalind had nodded reluctantly.

'That's great! Ros, this could be it for you!' Sable's voice had sounded genuinely pleased for her. 'Listen, this makes everything different! You go off tonight with this guy of yours. I'll tell Yuri there's a good chance you'll be able to get the money you owe him really soon—he'll like that. He'll understand that you can't afford to stand this guy of yours up. And you mustn't, Ros! Rich guys like you to be all over them. Take it from me—I know—I'm an expert! Speaking of which, if you want any tips on how to make it really hot in the sack for him, come to me—I've got a repertoire that would make your hair curl! But save it for when you really need it, you know? If you see signs of him going off you.'

Her eyes had gleamed. 'I am dead, dead curious about this guy—he just *has* to be something if he's actually managed to get you to go out with him! Jeez, I *knew* you just needed to get a sniff at the high life to make you want to chuck in this drop-dead drudgery you insist on! Play your cards right, Ros, and you can kiss it goodbye for ever! And listen, Ros,' she'd urged, 'you've got to play it really, really carefully when it comes to the money! Get him well and truly hooked first, then go for it! You don't want to make it too obvious it's the money you're after—these guys like to think you'd be with them even if they were dirt-poor—they're all dead vain about themselves and their sexual prowess! Even when they're totally useless at it. But at the same time—' a serious note had entered her voice '—it would be really smart to get some dosh off him as soon as you can. If I can hand over a big wodge from you to Yuri, that would really help—do us both good! And you won't have to worry about Yuri after tonight anyway—he wants to go to Monte Carlo for a while, so that will leave the coast clear for you with this bloke!'

She'd given Rosalind a huge grin and a double thumbs-up sign. 'Anyway, I am really, really thrilled for you that you've wised up and pulled at last! You go for it, girl! High life, here you come! You are going to have *such* a fun time from now on!'

Rosalind hadn't answered. She'd hardly been listening to Sable. She'd been thinking instead that she must have been mad to say she had a date with Cesar Montarez!

Would he even want to see her? Since dropping her off he hadn't exactly come chasing after her the next day, had he? Maybe he'd totally forgotten all about her?

And now it was her chasing after him.

She felt herself flush with embarrassment at what she was proposing to do: present herself to a man who owned a string of fancy resorts just because he'd expressed a passing fancy for her—a man whose image had been haunting her ever since she'd set eyes on him!—and hope he'd let her stick around his

casino for the evening to give her the alibi she needed to keep her away from Yuri Rostrov in the one place where she knew he wouldn't be given house-room.

Her spine chilled at the thought of the gangster. Embarrassment was the least of her problems.

But as she approached the double doors of the casino it looked as if she was about to hit yet another problem. The grand-looking doorman stepped forward.

'Excuse me, *señorita*, you are with...?'

He spoke very politely, but his bulk was in front of the door—which he was not opening for her.

Rosalind paused.

'I'm not with anyone—' she began.

The doorman bowed his head again. 'In which case, *señorita*, I regret that you may not go in.'

Rosalind stared at him. 'I'm over twenty-one,' she said. Could the man *really* think she was underage or something?

The man shook his head slightly.

'I regret, *señorita*, that it is house policy not to admit unaccompanied ladies.'

The penny dropped. Rosalind felt her face first flushing, then draining.

She looked totally different tonight from the way she'd looked wearing Sable's trashy number, and she had hoped that would make her acceptable. Tonight she looked far more like the kind of female who would frequent such an upmarket place. The dress she was wearing was the single one left over from the days when she had splashed money around like there was no tomorrow. Well, tomorrow had arrived, all right, and it was here right now—with a vengeance she hadn't dreamed of. Yet the chiffon whisper of the gossamer material as it shushed around her legs whisked her instantly back to those happier times, so long ago now, when she'd swanned around the beautiful places of the Spanish *costa* as if she'd had every right to be there.

Memory stabbed at her, but she put it aside. There was no time for painful memories now.

'I...I was here the other evening,' she faltered, hoping that might work.

The man was unmoved. 'I regret, *señorita*,' was all he said. His eyes glanced beyond her, to some waiting taxis clearly on hold for any patrons who might require them, and he nodded at a driver. The taxi began to glide forward.

'May I, *señorita*?' The doorman indicated the approaching taxi.

Rosalind stared, appalled. *No! I can't be thrown out before I've even got in! I can't!*

'Just a moment!' Rapidly she clicked open her handbag and drew out a slip of card. 'Señor Montarez asked me to come!' she said quickly, and handed the business card to the doorman. 'He gave me this the other night!'

Expressionlessly the man took it, and just as expressionlessly took in the fact that, yes, indeed, this extremely lovely but unaccompanied female was telling the truth. He handed the card back to Rosalind.

'One moment, if you please. Your name, *señorita*?'

Rosalind told him, her fingers crossing desperately in the folds of her skirt.

The doorman took out a mobile phone, keyed in a number, and after a brief moment spoke.

‘Señorita Foster is here, Señor Montarez.’ His voice sounded a little diffident, but that was all. A moment later he had disconnected. ‘Please enter, Señorita Foster,’ said the doorman, and ushered her through into the casino.

Weak with relief, she hurried inside. There was the huge lobby, with its acre of carpet and a wide set of shallow stairs to one side. She had hardly gazed around her when someone came lithely down the staircase, slipping a mobile phone inside his jacket pocket.

Her breath caught. Just as it had the first time she’d set eyes on Cesar Montarez.

And the second time.

And now the third.

He walked up to her, as fabulous now as he had been before, looking a million dollars in his superbly cut tuxedo, lean and tall—and oh, so beautiful...

He stopped in front of her. She felt faint. His dark, beautiful eyes looked down at her, rich with pleasure.

‘You came.’

It was all he said. All he needed to say.

All her reasons for coming here, all her dread about Yuri Rostrov, owing seven thousand euros to a gangster, simply evaporated.

Instead, she stared up at Cesar Montarez, who had not turned her away, who had not frowned and tried to think who she was, who had not been annoyed at her presenting herself on his doorstep—who had walked right up to her and looked at her as if she were the most welcome sight in the world.

‘Yes,’ she answered him. It was all she needed to say.

He took her hands and raised them, one by one, to his mouth. His eyes were dark, oh, so dark, and the expression in them... Oh, it just melted her to little pieces...

‘Come,’ said Cesar Montarez, and tucked her hand into his arm, and led her off.

Triumph soared through Cesar. Triumph, and deep, deep satisfaction. He’d been right all along. Despite the fact that it had taken her two nights to show up. Nights spent absolutely convinced that at any moment, any moment, he would glimpse her among the guests and would move forward and claim her. If she hadn’t shown up tonight he’d have gone after her, no question.

And now she was here. The satisfaction surged again. And the anticipation. Oh yes, definitely the anticipation.

So she had been playing hard to get. That was fine by him. It had merely whetted his appetite, that was all. She’d kept him waiting, and that was fine by him, too. It had merely increased the edge of his hunger.

And that would only increase the pleasure of the feasting.

As she walked beside him across the lobby and into one of the many bar areas the scent of her skin caught at him. She was wearing no perfume but her own. As for her gown—oh, it was as if he had never seen her in that trashy lamé tart-skin the other evening. Tonight she had dressed as a woman of her beauty ought to dress! With a restraint that only threw her loveliness into greater relief. The plain black, so elegantly cut, sleeveless, like a shift, with a high neckline, her burnished hair drawn back into a low chignon, drew total attention to her face. And this time her face was worth every tribute. Tonight, her make-up was dramatic, but not overdone. Her eyes were deep and shadowed, but her skin was uncovered, the fineness of her English

complexion, only lightly tanned, needing no foundation or powder. And her mouth was glossed, that was all—a mouth prepared for kissing...

But not yet. The night was young. He would savour it. Savour the pleasure of letting her beauty enthrall him, entice him. Hold back from her to increase both his appetite and hers, while knowing, with deep, pleasurable certainty, that there would be no restraint by the end of the evening, that the consummation of the pulsing desire he was already feeling would receive full and total satiation.

But to reach such a consummation certain rituals must first be observed.

He led her towards the long curving bar, and paused to smile down at her.

‘Champagne?’ he asked.

Rosalind nodded dumbly. She was probably incapable of speech, she thought. Her heart was skittering in her chest, her lips parted and breathless.

She had eyes only for him.

Cesar Montarez.

Who was smiling down at her and making her heart go skittering away.

His eyes glanced away from her to the attentively waiting barman, and she felt it as a loss she could not bear.

What's happening to me? Why am I feeling like this?

But she didn't want to answer. Didn't want to think. Wanted only for Cesar Montarez to look at her again—and to gaze at that devastating face, and drink it in until she was intoxicated by the sight of it.

In a daze she heard the soft pop of a champagne cork, and realised that she was being handed a beading, gently fizzing flute of golden wine.

‘Thank you for coming tonight.’

His voice was warm, like a caress. She went on gazing at him as his eyes bathed her in his regard.

He touched his glass to hers.

‘To the evening ahead,’ he murmured.

She could not answer, could not say a word. She seemed bereft of sense, as well as speech. Instead, she wordlessly sipped at her champagne, feeling the bubbles tingle through her, slipping into her bloodstream.

He smiled down at her, his gaze washing over her with a lingering appreciation that set her blood racing.

‘You are exquisite,’ he told her. ‘So very beautiful.’

His eyes told her so, as well as his words.

‘So are you,’ she answered, the words coming before she could stop them.

A smile quirked at his mouth, as though her answer had both amused and pleased him. He bent his head a fraction lower. She felt even fainter.

‘Then I foresee a wonderful evening ahead of us,’ he said, and the smile was in his voice, in his eyes. And more than a smile—oh, much, much more.

She had become another person. Of that she was certain. The other Rosalind, who had existed up until the moment when Cesar Montarez had walked towards her and taken her hand in his, had simply ceased to exist. Oh, she was out there somewhere, in the shadows, but Rosalind could not see her any more, could not feel her. Could not feel her fear and dread, could not feel her revulsion at the mess she had got herself into with a bunch of gangsters...

Cesar Montarez simply blotted her out of existence, that other Rosalind.

And called this Rosalind into existence—wonderful, magical existence!

She drifted at his side, feeling as light as air, floating on a cloud of bliss, feeling the dark promise of his presence at her side, supremely conscious of his lean, potent strength, the wash of his dark eyes on her, the play of his sculpted lips, the heady scent of his maleness, intoxicating her like liquor!

‘So,’ he murmured as they left the bar area, ‘you came at last. Why did you keep me waiting so long?’

His eyes were warm on her face, like a caress. She could not answer. He smiled, and softly brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers. She let the bliss of the sensation wash through her.

‘No matter.’ He smiled again. ‘You are here—that is all that is important.’

Yes, she thought dreamily, floating on a haze of happiness. That is all that is important. Nothing else is

Certainly nothing as sordid, as scary, as owing seven thousand euros to a gangster...

‘Tell me.’ His voice tightened suddenly. ‘You have told your friend you will be doing no more favours for her? I don’t have to warn you, do I, not to go near Yuri Rostrov again?’

She shook her head sharply. ‘No! No, I don’t want anything more to do with him!’ There was a fervour about her answer that satisfied him.

‘That is as well,’ he said soberly. ‘He is not a man to get involved with, however remotely. Stay away from him—and from anyone who knows him.’

A flicker of fear had shown in her eyes briefly. Again, it satisfied him. Naïve she might be, but he had to get the message across to her—the likes of Yuri Rostrov were far too dangerous for her. And far too sordid.

Rosalind saw the stiffening of revulsion in his eyes, and felt guilt pinch at her.

The other Rosalind came crowding back.

Tell him! came a voice from deep inside. Tell him why you are really here! Tell him that you are running scared of Yuri Rostrov, that you came here tonight simply because it was the one place you knew he wouldn’t be, and because it gave you an excuse to avoid him. Tell him you’re up to your neck in debt to him!

But she couldn’t tell him. The words wouldn’t come. She didn’t want them to. She didn’t want to see Cesar Montarez’s revulsion at Yuri Rostrov become revulsion at her as well. She couldn’t bear it.

Tonight was a dream—a brief, blissful dream in which she was wafting around on the arm of the most gorgeous man in the world, who smiled down at her with dark, desiring eyes. She couldn’t destroy that dream.

And what would be the point? She was only here for the evening. Oh, Sable might think that she was here to take herself a rich lover and get herself out of debt, but Rosalind knew better. That way was not for her—it was quite impossible to contemplate behaving in such a way! No, this was just one magical

Cinderella night for her. One short evening while she stayed out of Yuri Rostrov's way and let herself bask in the bliss that was Cesar Montarez's company. And he seemed to want nothing but hers in return.

She slipped willingly back into the dream that was Cesar Montarez. Hers for one brief evening—before reality returned with cold, sickening vengeance.

But not quite yet.

He took her to the roulette tables, where a chair magically appeared for her, and as she took her place, her gossamer skirts pooling gracefully around her, he stood behind her, his hand pressing on the chair-back. She could feel him—feel the warmth, the strength of his body—and her blood raced. She dipped her head, sipping from her champagne.

He leant forward, pushing a handful of chips towards her.

'Choose a number,' he invited.

She gave one at random, and watched him make the play, looking with all the other players at the wheel spinning, and slowing, and coming to a halt at quite another number. For a moment she felt dismay, and then realised with a sense of light-headedness that since he owned the whole casino the loss could hardly count!

The croupier called another play, and she took another chip, entering into the spirit of things. This time she picked her birthday, only to see it lose again. She twisted her head back.

'You choose!' She laughed.

His eyes gleamed and he reached forward, pushing a pile of chips onto yet another numbered square. Again, for a brief moment Rosalind felt a qualm, but stilled it. How could Cesar Montarez lose against himself? Or win? The whole thing was nothing more than an amusing exercise.

As the wheel slowed she felt her breath catch. The ball continued to roll around until, with widening eyes, Rosalind watched it nestle into a particular slot—the very number that her chips were on—and hold!

She gasped, clapping her hands with pleasure, and heard Cesar laugh as well.

'My turn again!' she exclaimed, and placed a fresh piece on yet another number. This time she won, and she clapped her hands again, and toasted Cesar in champagne.

From then on her luck came and went—mostly went. At last there were only a few chips left in front of her, and she made a face, getting to her feet.

'Time to quit while I'm ahead,' she said ruefully.

Cesar's mouth quirked. 'Sensible girl. Come—'

He held his hand out to her and she took it, and moved away with him.

The dream was still floating her away—she couldn't resist it. It was lifting all the weights and worries of her life, leaving them far, far below.

And she wouldn't, couldn't spoil the dream—the only time she would ever have with him.

Because that was what Cesar Montarez was; she knew in her heart of hearts. Nothing more than a dream. He was like some wonderful fantasy, like watching a film where the most fabulous film star in the world suddenly reached out through the screen and drew her up into the glamorous unreality of his world.

Tomorrow she would have to face up to the hideous mess she was in.

But not now.

Not yet.

‘Rosalind?’

His accented voice cut through her anguished mental agitation. For a moment her mind went completely blank, and then, recovering herself, she heard herself saying, ‘Is there a seaview from the casino terrace?’

She watched his mouth quirk. ‘A very beautiful view—would you like to see it?’

He guided her towards the arching French windows that opened in a parade to the wide cantilevered terrace beyond. The view was indeed fantastic. Rosalind wafted forward, resting her hands on the stone balcony, gazing out. The land sloped away, cunningly landscaped so that the hotel and its little private villas were hardly visible through the artfully placed trees and greenery. Only the marina down by the sea’s edge was highlighted, the expensive yachts swinging slowly at their moorings. The night air was sweet, rich with the sound of cicadas, the stars blazing in the heavens. Far out to sea on the surface of the water the starlight gleamed and was gone.

She gazed around, drinking in the view, feeling the soft night air play in her hair, on her bare arms.

Then, as she gazed, she felt another touch to her skin.

She stood quite still as Cesar Montarez moved behind her, the tips of his fingers lightly, oh, so lightly grazing up and down her upper arms.

Almost she leaned into him, wanting to feel the length of his body behind her, wanting to feel his hands close over her arms, drawing her back against him.

But she held still. To move, to move at all, would be to invite him. To respond to him with a blatant invitation—yes, would he please seduce her? Would he please caress her, kiss her, take her to his bed...?

And she could not be that blatant—could not.

So she simply went on standing there, while time slowed right down. The entire universe focused in so that there was nothing left in it, nothing at all except the feel of his fingertips slowly, so slowly, drifting up and down her skin...

Every muscle in her body was tense. The effort of holding herself still was quite excruciating, yet she could not move—could not even break away. She could only go on standing there, immobile, her breath coming low and silent, her eyes shuttering as she felt the slow bliss of his drifting touch.

‘Cesar! There you are!’

The loud voice hailing him was brutal in its interruption. Rosalind started, and immediately Cesar’s hands abandoned her. She felt him move slightly, and turn away from her.

‘Pat—it’s good to see you.’

His voice was bland, urbane. Rosalind used the moment to take a deep breath and turn her body to see what was happening.

A man had come up to Cesar, late middle-aged, in a white dinner jacket, with a glass of whisky in his hand.

‘Now, have you given any more thought to what I said the other day, Cesar?’ the man enquired, his Irish accent audible.

‘Of course,’ Cesar answered smoothly. It looked good on paper, the business proposition that Pat O’Hanran was promoting—a new deluxe golf club that would combine the O’Hanran brand name with the

El Paraíso track record in luxury resorts. Nevertheless, after a few moments of business discussion about the prospect of a mutually advantageous joint venture, he succeeded in halting the other man.

‘If it’s convenient I’ll come along tomorrow with my architect and landscape designer and look at the practicalities of the site you propose,’ he suggested.

The notion found favour, and with a wry glance at Rosalind the Irishman finished the conversation and headed back indoors.

‘My apologies,’ murmured Cesar.

‘Please—I don’t mean to monopolise you,’ Rosalind returned diffidently.

The dark eyes gleamed.

‘You do more than that,’ he told her, his voice low and husky. He took her arm. ‘But, tell me, what would you like to do next? Try your luck at the tables again? Some more champagne? Would you like to dine now? Or...’ the gleam came again, and made her feel suddenly hot ‘...perhaps you would like to admire the view from here a little longer?’

‘Food sounds great!’ replied Rosalind, her voice suddenly croaky.

His mouth quirked. ‘Of course,’ he said smoothly.

Too smoothly.

What am I doing? thought Rosalind, as she sat opposite Cesar Montarez in the windowed bay of the casino’s restaurant. It was crowded, but whether it was the artful spacing of the tables, or simply that no one else in the room seemed to exist any more, she felt as though he was the only person there.

The food was superb. Meltingly she savoured the delicate seafood terrine, sipping at her chilled white wine. It had been an age since she had eaten like this, and for a moment memory tugged at her with poignant anguish. Then she put it aside. That time was gone—and this time, now, was going to be all too fleeting. Don’t spoil it with memories, she told herself. And don’t spoil it by thinking about reality. Tonight will be over soon enough, and tomorrow will have to be dealt with—but not yet.

Not yet.

What they talked about as they ate she had no recollection. Nothing difficult, nothing demanding. She asked him about El Paraíso and found herself fascinated by how a luxury resort was set up and operated. Seamlessly he moved on to talk about the other El Paraíso resorts, and then about the conditions of tourism and development in Spain itself.

‘It is both a blessing and a curse,’ he told her. ‘Offering much, but taking much away as well.’

‘It’s certainly a blessing for Brits who can’t stand the British winter!’ she observed.

‘You’ve been here some time, you said?’

She nodded. ‘Yes, nearly three years now.’

‘What brought you here? A holiday and then you decided to stay?’

She smiled uncertainly. ‘Sort of. I...came with someone...and then stayed on.’

‘And your...companion?’

She glanced away. ‘I’m on my own now,’ she answered, and her eyes slid back to his of their own accord.

The slightest smile of satisfaction played around his mouth.

She found it hard to look away again.

Dinner was a long, lingering affair. Once or twice Rosalind got the impression that people were trying to catch Cesar's eye—either guests or, she assumed, some of his employees. But, apart from casual greetings to some of the guests who approached him personally, he made no attempt to divert his attention from her.

Even when one of those seeking his attention was a svelte, breathtaking blonde.

She was clearly with another man, Rosalind could see, on the other side of the room. But at the end of their meal, as her escort was busying himself with signing the chit, the woman rose to her feet and made her way with gliding purpose towards Cesar Montarez.

‘Cesar—’

Her voice was breathy, with a distinct Nordic accent. She was wearing what was obviously an extremely expensive ice-blue number from a well-known Milanese fashion house, low-cut and very clinging. A showy diamond necklace and earrings glittered on her tanned skin. Quite unself-consciously the woman bent, bestowing a lingering kiss on Cesar's cheek.

‘It's been too long...’ The breathy voice came again.

‘Ilsa.’

Cesar's voice was restrained. Rosalind would have had to have been deaf not to hear that note in it. So would the other woman—but, whether or not she heard it, she ignored it.

‘We should get together now that I'm back in Spain. Take the yacht out. Find a little privacy.’ Her smile lingered, like the look she gave him. ‘The way we used to.’

‘I'm a little preoccupied these days, Ilsa.’

Cesar's voice was courteous, but Rosalind could hear the steel beneath it.

A pair of ice-blue eyes, a perfect match for her dress, darted in her direction—and dismissed her.

‘Well, Cesar, *querida*.’ The woman's crimson-tipped fingernails rested briefly on his shoulder. ‘When you've finished with your little...preoccupation...’ the dismissive glance came Rosalind's way again ‘...let me know. If I'm still around...’

The woman lifted her hand from Cesar's shoulder and glanced at Rosalind again.

‘Enjoy tonight. It's probably all you'll get.’

She glided away again, her poison darting home.

There was a moment's silence. Then Cesar spoke.

‘My apologies.’

Rosalind gave a slight shake of her head.

‘*De nada*.’ The Spanish phrase rolled off her tongue.

She meant it, too. After all, the information that ice-blue Ilsa had given had hardly been telling her something she hadn't known all along.

But you're not going to stay the night, anyway.

No, of course she wasn't. That would be insane. Cesar Montarez might be the most breathtaking male she'd ever seen, but he was little more than a stranger.

He wouldn't be by morning... whispered that voice inside her head again, offering her things she knew she must not take.

But she couldn't leave—not quite yet. It was all right to stay a little longer, linger over her liqueur, let her mouth speak inconsequential words while her eyes simply drank in the beauty of Cesar Montarez.

That smile was playing over his mouth again. He'd done it off and on all through the meal, as though he were contemplating something.

'You are very forbearing,' he remarked. 'It is generous of you. Ilsa Tronberg is a very spoilt woman. She caught a rich, elderly husband, divorced him, and is now cruising the Mediterranean enjoying her settlement—the yacht was thrown in for free!—while she decides which wealthy man is going to have the privilege of keeping her while she banks the remainder.'

His voice sounded cynical. Rosalind wasn't surprised. But then she could hardly be surprised that a rich, beautiful divorcee like the ice-blue blonde would like to put her ring on Cesar Montarez's finger—most rich men were nothing in the gorgeousness stakes. Cesar Montarez, rich *and* gorgeous, would be a prize for any spoilt, ambitious woman.

A prize for any woman.

She shook her head mentally. That wasn't a pleasant way to think about him. OK, so his wealth lent him buckets of glamour—she'd be a total hypocrite to deny that!—but it wasn't his wealth that was keeping her here, sitting opposite him, drinking him in like vintage champagne.

For the first time in her life she felt profoundly a deep gratitude that she had been blessed with beauty herself. Because she knew that had she not been so blessed then she would not have been sitting here. That Cesar Montarez would not even know she existed.

And he certainly would not be smiling at her through those half-shuttered eyes, while that smile played around his mouth and made her want to reach her fingers forward and press them to his lips, as if she could catch his smile with her fingertips.

'Poor woman,' she heard herself say.

The smile stilled. '*Que?*'

'She can hardly be happy, living like that.' Rosalind's voice was openly pitying.

Cesar was looking at her as if he didn't quite believe what she was saying.

'Most women envy her,' he replied dryly. 'She is fantastic-looking, well-off, and still young. The world is at her feet.'

Rosalind wondered for a moment whether to say what she really thought—that that might all be true, but what kind of life must it be 'cruising the Mediterranean' on the lookout for another rich man to marry...?

But then, with a pang, she realised that for a man like Cesar Montarez, and for those who moved in his circles, the hunt for riches was endless, however they were gained. Hadn't he just told her over dinner how he'd started with nothing but a loan from the bank and built his resort empire from scratch in twelve years? Of course wealth was important to him—it would be absurd to say otherwise.

And the last thing she wanted to do now was spoil this magical evening out of time by starting a heavy-duty discussion about what made for happiness and whether that had to include shedloads of money.

So, instead, she simply gave him a baiting smile.

‘But not you. You’re not at her feet, it seems,’ she commented dryly.

Their eyes met, and Rosalind’s heart gave a little skip.

‘I never was, believe me.’

No, thought Rosalind, you simply slept with her, that’s all.

It was a sobering reminder—or it should have been. The trouble was, even as the words formed in her mind, so did an image to go with them. Oh, not of ice-blue Ilsa, slowly peeling off that clinging evening gown while Cesar Montarez watched her with waiting eyes, but of herself performing that office. She saw herself slide the zip on her dress, let the material fall from her shoulders, slipping from her body while all the while Cesar stood, watching her, his entire being focused on her...waiting to take her to his bed....

CHAPTER FOUR

SHE felt a flush go through her body, warm and dilating.

‘What are you thinking about?’

He did not need to ask, not even in that amused, oh-so-intimate tone. He already knew the answer. Had known it from the moment he’d seen the daze in her eyes, watched the blood flush visibly across her creamy skin.

He felt himself respond to it, felt the swift surge of quickening. It had been coming and going all evening, and he had had to fight increasingly hard not to let it overpower him. The battle itself had been enjoyable, testing his own strength in resisting a growing need simply to cut to the chase, to take this beautiful, enticing woman off to his private quarters where he could be finally completely undisturbed with her. And because he knew that that was exactly what would happen by the end of the evening he could take pleasure now in reining in his own desire. For it meant that the moment when he could at last let go of that fine control and indulge his every desire for her would be all the sweeter for it.

Certainly, apart from Pat O’Hanran—who had, to do him justice, beaten a retreat pretty promptly when he’d realised he was *de trop*—and Ilsa Tronberg—clearly on the prowl for him again—he’d been given a wide berth this evening. His staff had got the message loud and clear, and it had taken nothing more than a quelling glance to dispose of any of them who had thought they could catch him for a quick word about matters which, right now, were of little concern to him. He hired the best, paid them handsomely, and they didn’t need babysitting.

Not tonight.

Tonight he had other matters on his agenda.

Such as enjoying the way that Rosalind Foster was trying to pretend that she wasn’t thinking, right now, of the pleasures to come...

Her stumbling, ‘Oh, nothing!’ in answer to his query merely amused him. She’d been thinking of him, and what would be happening with him very soon, that was certain—he knew when a woman was becoming aroused, and Rosalind Foster was showing all the signs. The flush, the dilating eyes, the feathering looks, the pulse at her slender throat, the fluttering of her hands...

The smile played around his mouth again. She would be good, he knew. Very good indeed.

Like a restless stallion beneath a master rider, his desire kicked again, letting its presence be felt.

Soon, he told it. But not quite yet...

‘Tell me,’ he said, his voice little more than conversational again, ‘what have you seen of Spain since you were here? Or do you simply prefer to stay by the coast?’

Grateful for a return to ordinary topics that did not refer to Cesar Montarez’s former sexual partners—let alone his anticipated immediate future one!—Rosalind took up the question.

‘Oh, I’ve managed to do the obvious tourist things—the Alhambra, Granada, Seville, Jerez. We never got very far north, however, so I’ve never seen Madrid and Estremadura, or the north coast or the Pyrenees.

I'd have liked to have seen some of the battlefield sites from the Peninsular War but—' She broke off. 'Well, perhaps another time.'

If he noticed her hesitation he made no comment. Instead, he said, the note of surprise not completely concealed, 'Battlefield sites?'

'Yes—Badajoz, Ciudad Rodrigo, Salamanca—all those places. I suppose it's a bit morbid,' she allowed, 'but the names are so evocative. Even though, of course, they were such terrible times for Spain.'

Cesar was looking at her curiously. 'Have you been a student of history—you seem very knowledgeable?'

She shook her head straight away. She'd never studied anything interesting—just useful. Like the secretarial and business studies course she'd taken to enable her to get work locally and go on living at home, bringing in an extra wage. Her eyes shadowed. That was all gone now, and instead here she was, being wined and dined in five-star luxury by a five-star man. She wanted to keep her real life as far away from this magical evening as she could.

So all she answered to his question was, 'I've always loved historical novels, especially from that period, and the Peninsular War is such an obviously exciting setting for them.' She gave a self-mocking smile. 'Like most women I'm a sucker for the uniforms from that era! All the men, of whatever nationality, were so dashing and glamorous! Yes, I know that in reality it was terrible and bloodthirsty, and so many men—and women—died, and there were such atrocities by the French, and the Spanish in retaliation, but even so...' She shrugged. 'There's just something about that period that fascinates me!'

Cesar leant back in his chair and gave a laugh. He looked relaxed suddenly, and twice as sexy, Rosalind registered.

'I should be stern and tell you that war is not glamorous or fascinating at all—*por Dios*, is Spain not still haunted by the memories of our own hideous Civil War that tore us apart, with wounds still not yet healed?—and yet...' His eyes danced. 'I have to confess that when I was a student I, too, chose the Napoleonic era to specialise in. And I confess, too, to sometimes wishing that for perhaps a week or two, no more, I could try out being someone like Don Julian Sanchez, a fierce, bold guerrilla who mercilessly harried the French during the War of Independence. He and his like were very wild, virtually brigands. They were used by the regular forces for reconnaissance and intelligence gathering, and one of the most remarkable things Don Julian did was to capture the French governor of Ciudad Rodrigo when he was out hunting, and hand him over to Wellington as a prize. I believe the governor thought himself fortunate he wasn't skewered on the spot!'

For a moment the image of Cesar Montarez accoutred as a wild, hard-riding, hard-fighting guerrilla captivated Rosalind. Then she shook her head.

'No—it sounds far too rough for you! I can far more easily see you in Moorish clothes—those beautiful flowing robes...'

He gave another laugh and leant forward. 'I can see you have an active imagination, *querida*. I foresee some...interesting...episodes between us. I am sure it would not be too difficult for me to find such robes, if it would...please you...'

His eyes were dancing still, but the expression in them was more than amused. Rosalind felt the flush spreading out through her skin, and looked hastily down at her liqueur glass. He reached out a hand, gently drawing one finger down the line of her cheek and tipping it under her chin to lift it before letting her go.

'You make me feel like a Moor,' he said softly. 'Such downcast eyes, such hesitance—such promise...'

She swallowed, her throat tight. Her breath seemed too tight for her body.

I've got to go! This is getting out of hand!

The impulse formed in her panic. She must go—she really must! Her resistance was weakening with every moment that she stayed in Cesar Montarez's company.

Then, in his normal conversational voice again, he went on, 'Do you know, I don't believe I have ever discussed the Peninsular War with a woman before? At least not one under fifty! I had one very excellent university professor, however, who was female—she was an expert on the Reconquista. Perhaps she had been inspired by that most indomitable queen, Isabella of Castile!'

Rosalind looked at him. 'Did you really study history?' she asked. 'I would have thought something like economics or accountancy would have been your subject.'

He gave his quirking smile again, and a touch of self-mockery showed in his eyes.

'When I was young I considered money tedious, like so many of the young do. I have since discovered its advantages.'

His eyes glinted around the luxurious dining room that was just a fragment of his resort portfolio. There was satisfaction in his voice, as well as a pride that she guessed he deserved, having built it all from scratch.

She made her voice as neutral as she could, but it was hard. She had no quarrel with a man who could make a fortune—if he made it honestly, through hard work—and after all she was here enjoying the fruits of it for the evening—yet the contrast between what Cesar Montarez possessed and what she possessed—or rather did not possess—could hardly have been greater! The meal they had just eaten, not to mention the wines and the champagne, if he had been paying for it as a customer, would have come to well over a hundred euros alone!

She suppressed a sigh. There was no point thinking about it.

She could only enjoy this brief, magical respite from it.

Which was so nearly coming to an end.

But not quite yet.

'Do you prefer coffee? Or perhaps a very English cup of tea?' Cesar's query, the last three words said in an exaggeratedly English accent, brought a smile to her lips and came as a welcome delay. Yes, the evening was drawing to a close. The magic was nearly all spent.

But she would make the very most of the last of it.

'Coffee would be lovely,' she answered, following through by glancing around to see if there was a waiter cruising nearby. But to her consternation, as her gaze came back, she realised that Cesar was getting to his feet.

'The night is far too beautiful for us to waste it indoors,' he murmured, and came to help her up.

'Oh—where—?'

'I will show you. Come.'

She followed him meekly. Presumably there was another terrace somewhere, where guests could enjoy the fresh air along with their beverages. The bar had had such a terrace, now that she thought about it. But instead of heading towards the bar Cesar was taking her towards a bank of lifts.

'Um...' said Rosalind, hesitating automatically.

He glanced down at her again with that quirking smile.

'There is a higher terrace,' he told her. 'The views are even better than from the main terrace.'

‘Um...’ she said again, feeling jittery.

Just say you have to go now! Just say, Thank you very much but I have to go now. It’s been a lovely evening. Goodbye.

She heard the words in her head. Felt her brain give the order for the words, give the order for her legs to stop walking towards the lift door which was opening now.

She walked right in, the words dying unsaid.

The doors of the lift sliced shut.

Instantly it was as if they were in the smallest space imaginable. As they were lifted away Rosalind felt her stomach stay behind. That was just the lift, wasn’t it?

A second later they had come to a halt and the doors were whooshing open again. Rosalind hurried out. That chamber had just felt far, far too small.

She stopped dead.

She was in an apartment.

There was a little lobby, and then a reception room opening out beyond. Beautifully styled, spacious, elegant, softly lit—and deserted. On the far side were sliding doors opening to a riot of greenery.

Cesar ushered her forward.

‘Um...’ said Rosalind for the third time.

‘Come,’ said Cesar.

Her reluctance amused him. Shortly, he expected, she would say something about it being time for her to go. She’d drink her coffee first, and then smile politely and make a move.

So would he.

He opened the sliding doors and they slid noiselessly back, letting in the warmth of the air outside. Patio furniture was placed on the tiled floor, but Rosalind paid it no attention. Instead she was gazing out at the views. They were indeed even better than those from the main terrace. This apartment terrace was angled differently from the main casino terrace, so that more of the marina was shielded by the treetops, making the atmosphere darker, more private. The cicadas were going crazy up here, too, sounding louder and closer. Bougainvillea rioted over the railings of the patio, and the heady scents of night flowers winnowed in the air. No noise filtered up from the casino below.

‘It’s beautiful!’ she breathed.

‘Yes,’ said Cesar simply. It was indeed beautiful, and his architect had excelled himself in creating an apartment that was so convenient for the casino and yet so very private from it.

There was the sound of lift doors opening again, and Rosalind turned. One of the waiters from the restaurant was approaching them, bearing a tray of coffee.

‘Jaime—*gracias*.’

Cesar nodded, and the young man came and set out the tray on the patio table. Then, with a murmur to his boss, he took his leave.

‘Come and sit down.’

She might as well, Rosalind thought. After all that champagne and then the wine—white and red—and the liqueur, she could do with clearing her head a little. The coffee, hot and strong, was reviving, and she sipped it gratefully.

Cesar sat across from her, one ankle resting on his knee, his long, powerful thighs half widened. He leaned back in his padded chair, taking his coffee, obviously at his ease.

He looked incredible. The very image of a fantasy Latin lover.

Rosalind dropped her eyes, sipping again at her coffee and tucking her feet back.

They talked lazily. Cesar remained relaxed, and although Rosalind found it disturbing to look him in the eyes too long, he was a good few feet away from her, and posed no immediate threat. He laughed more here, his white teeth gleaming, making him look younger. At one point he set his empty cup down, and before refilling it—and hers—cricked his neck and undid his bow tie, slipping open the top button of his dress shirt.

He sat back.

Rosalind stared, unable to tear her eyes away.

God, but there was something about a man in evening dress with a loose tie and an open collar! Something that simply went *Thunk!* all the way through her. He still looked svelte, and elegant, and oh-so-expensive, but the slight token of undress, however little it was actually revealing, simply sent shivers through her. He looked, the word came to her, raffish.

And very, very sexy.

She took her refilled cup numbly.

Oh, my girl, it is time to go—with bells on!

But she couldn't. Not yet. Not quite yet. She still had a cup of coffee to finish. And besides, Cesar was talking about a visit he'd made a while ago to the Canaries, and taking a boat out and watching dolphins...

Rosalind sat, sipping her coffee, and drank it up. Drank him up.

Her cup was empty. Regretfully, she set it down. There was no clock to strike midnight, but it had struck all the same. She had to go. The evening was over—she couldn't eke it out any longer.

She stood up.

Immediately Cesar did likewise.

'I have to go,' said Rosalind.

He came towards her.

'Why?' he asked, stopping in front of her. There was nothing more in his voice than mild enquiry, yet Rosalind's breath felt tight.

'Because,' she answered.

'Because you don't do one-night stands—is that it?'

Hearing the ugly English phrase echoed back at her made her flinch. Then she shrugged. It was the truth, however ugly the phrase.

'Yes.'

He gave a little shake of his head. 'This will not be what you insist on calling a one-night stand. Why do you make things ugly—' his voice was low '—when they are so...beautiful? As beautiful as you, Rosalind *querida*.'

As his voice softened he reached out a hand, touching her chignon, his thumb just grazing the nape of her neck below.

She felt her skin quiver.

He did nothing more, just stood there, his thumb slowly moving across her nape, so lightly.

'You are very beautiful, Rosalind. And tonight will be beautiful, too. You will not call it by an ugly name that has no truth in it. Tonight is made for desire, and there is desire between us. If you deny that you lie, and you will not do that, will you, Rosalind *querida*? You will not stand there and tell me that you do not quiver at my touch.' He took a step forward and slipped his left hand over hers, lifted it to his mouth and brushed, oh, so lightly, the back of it, his lips parting slightly so she could feel the warm moistness along her skin.

'No, please—'

Her voice was faint, as faint as her breath was tight. She could feel her breasts start to tingle, and the touch of his thumb at the base of her neck seemed to be washing down through the length of her spine.

'Please—'

Her voice was even fainter. The world seemed to be fading away. Reduced only to the touch of his thumb stroking her nape. Then, as he pulled her hand down towards him, he closed the space between them, and his mouth was not brushing her knuckles, but her lips, and a thousand sensations were bucking through her, leaving her weaker, fainter than she had ever been in her life.

Her eyes fluttered shut. She gave herself to the bliss of it. The bliss of feeling his mouth moving slowly, oh, so slowly on hers, and his thumb working at her nape. And he was kissing her still, and her mouth was opening to his, and there was a little moan sounding in her throat which seemed to make him move in closer on her, and she could feel the long, lean heat of his body pressed against hers. Her breasts were tight against him and his mouth was tasting hers, teasing and tasting, and she had no strength in her to do anything, anything but let him, and sink her body against his.

And then she realised dimly that his fingers had moved, that the sensation had shifted. Slowly, slowly, her zip was easing back, the cool air was touching her spine, and now his hand, warm after the cool air, its palm gliding down her naked back, was leisurely unclipping her bra as it passed on its journey to curve possessively, languorously, around the swell of her bottom and pull him into her.

As he fitted her into the cradle of his hips she felt an easing go through him, as if tension had been drained away, as if he had positioned her exactly as he wanted her to be.

But his mouth was still possessing her, and she was returning its possession, finding her breasts pushing against him, wanting to graze against him even while the palm of his hand was holding her tightly. Making her feel every long inch of his very, very obvious arousal.

Desire drenched through her. Debilitating, helpless desire.

Somewhere in the remnants of her logical mind she knew she must pull away from him, knew she must step back, recover her breath, recover her sanity and zip up her dress, pick up her evening purse and walk, with unalterable purpose, towards that lift and go—just go, go, go...

But not yet. Not quite yet...

He was kissing her more deeply now, opening her mouth and caressing within, taking his pleasure and his ease of her. And at her hips he was moving slowly, rhythmically, insistently...arousingly.

And, dear God, but she was aroused! It was flooding through her like an unstoppable tide, and she wanted, oh, she wanted...

She wanted him. All of him. Everything of him. Wanted the closeness of him, the lean hardness, the male, virile beauty of him—wanted him piercing her, possessing her. And she knew, with a deep, releasing flood of relinquishment of the last of her ebbing resistance, that she was going to have him.

He was a temptation too gorgeous to resist.

He took her to his bed. She had no memory of how she got there, of the distance from the terrace to his bedroom, of how the cool, dark sheets of his bed came to be beneath her naked back, her naked hips and thighs. She knew only that somehow, some time, he had undressed her, easing the loosened dress from her shoulders, sliding it down her body, her unfastened bra disgorging her swollen breasts, ripe into his waiting hands. She had arched back, gasping as he cupped them, then dipped his mouth to their straining peaks, shooting such arrows of ecstasy through her that she'd thought she must explode with pleasure.

But there was more pleasure yet to come—so much.

He eased her back down, coming down slowly over her, and he was naked, too. She did not know how, did not care—cared only that his hands were stroking her, arousing her, and his mouth was on her flesh, laving, and kissing, and seeking.

Her hair was loose, like a sheet of rich chocolate swathed across the pillows, and his hands were sliding in it, holding her with it as he reared over her, his thighs like iron either side of hers. Her back arched as he lowered himself into her, arched to meet him, her body ready, oh, so ready, to take him into her.

As he entered her she gave a little gasp, her eyes flaring, and he gave a laugh, a low, triumphant laugh, and slid harder into her, deeper, and again, and again. With each thrust her arousal climbed. Her hands were around his back, fingertips gripping him with a power she had not known she possessed as she arched to meet him, time and time and time again, each time a deeper penetration, each penetration a deeper pleasure, pleasure upon pleasure—until each pleasure fused, one into another, more and yet more, and her back was arching, and her neck, and each thrust took her higher, and higher, and her body was one whole fusion of pleasure that seared her whole body in white, blinding heat...

She cried out, and it was as if that was a signal to him. He thrust one last, ultimate time, and his body poured into her as she convulsed around him, spread beneath him, possessed utterly by him.

It was the light that woke her. Pressing on her eyelids with insistent brightness, drawing her back into the day. The new day.

Even after her eyes had fluttered open, so reluctantly, she went on lying there, quite immobile. She was spooned against Cesar, and she could feel his chest rising and falling in rhythmic slumber against her back. His breath was warm on her neck, coming and going with that same deep, slumberous rhythm. His arm lay heavy across her, folding her to him, holding her.

For a while, a long while, she simply lay there, feeling him holding her. She felt so warm, so cradled, that she never wanted to move.

But she must move.

The dream was over.

Anguish washed through her, making her bite her lip to keep silent. She must go back to the bleak reality that waited for her.

She'd been mad to stay; she knew that. Had known it last night—known it from the very moment when the last of her resistance, the last of her will, had simply dissolved away in the irresistible tide of passion he

had let loose in her.

Dear God, if she'd known how easily he could sweep her away she'd never have been so rash, so insane as to have courted such danger all evening!

One-night stand. The phrase came to her chillingly—and yet, reckless as she knew she had been, she could not regret it, lying here, feeling his arm holding her to his strong, beautiful body, remembering every moment of their consummations—so many she had hardly known when one ended and the next began!—that had melded her to him, time after time. No, she could not regret anything—anything at all...

She would remember last night all her life! It had been a time out of time itself, a dream, part of the magical, glamorous evening that had taken her away from the crushing pressure that was the reality of her life.

For a little while longer she went on lying there in her blissful cocoon, making herself feel every moment of being so warm, so safe.

Moving away was the worst thing in the world. Easing her body apart from him so carefully that he would not wake. Inching she edged away, until she was disentangled, and then she slid to her feet.

She felt cold, oh, so cold, and not just because of the chill of the early morning.

She wanted to turn and look back at him, but she knew she mustn't. She knew that if she looked back she would never leave him—and she must. Now. Quickly.

Her eyes skittered around the room, spotting her evening dress carelessly falling off a chair, her shoes scattered nearby, her bra peeping out of the black chiffon folds of her dress—her panties half under the chair.

She felt the colour come and go in her cheeks as memory flooded back—

No! There wasn't time to think of the memories! Not now—later. Later she would remember last night.

After all, she would have a long, long time ahead of her in which to remember Cesar Montarez and the magic he had woven for her with his body.

Cesar stirred. There was something wrong. A moment ago there had been something right—something totally right. Something so right he knew he hadn't felt so right for a long, long time. Might never, indeed, have felt so right in his life before.

Rosalind Foster had been in his arms.

But she wasn't any more.

His eyes sprang open.

Instantly they lighted on her. She was standing with her back to him, her shapely, rounded bottom veiled from him by a pair of panties which he remembered distinctly he had removed from her very enjoyably last night. Her arms were behind her back, trying to hook her bra together. Her long chestnut hair was tumbled down her spine, getting in the way of her fumbling fingers.

She was obviously in the process of doing a runner.

For a second a rush of primitive emotion surged through him—echoing very tangibly in his loins. She was trying to leave him!

Almost he leapt from the bed to restrain her, the primitive urge to prevent the departure of the woman he had spent the night with almost overpowering him—he wanted her again!

Then, as she finally managed to fasten her bra, and bent to pick up her evening gown, he relaxed. Lifting himself onto his elbow, he let himself watch her instead.

It was very pleasurable.

In the morning light her body was as superb as it had been last night. A true woman's body, with curving hips and full breasts. Graceful and queenly. And quite fantastically beautiful.

He watched her as she lowered her evening gown so that she could step inside it, pulling its light folds up over her legs and hips, sliding her arms into the armholes and then pulling it up over her torso. Her hands twisted round again, and started to drag up the zip. And still Cesar lay there, watching her, his eyes flickering over her in silent appreciation.

Zippering complete, she stooped to scoop up her shoes, slipping them on her feet. Her hair fell in a glossy waterfall as she straightened.

'That,' said Cesar drawlingly, 'was a complete waste of time, Rosalind *querida*.'

She froze. Totally froze.

Then slowly, stiffly, she turned.

Cesar hauled himself lithely up against the pillows, lounging back, the sheet winding around his hips and thighs. His torso moulded powerfully against the bedclothes, and he looked lean, and honed, and very, very masculine. Rosalind felt emotion kick through her, just as she'd feared it would.

'And now,' he said invitingly, 'you can take it all off again and come back here.'

'Cesar...' Her voice was faint. Her eyes were as green as emeralds in the morning light. And wide and staring. Appalled.

'*Si?*' he returned encouragingly.

'I—I...it's not a good idea! I have to go. I really do!'

'You know,' he replied, and his mouth was quirked, 'you said that last night—but you didn't go, *querida*—and you won't go now.'

Her face worked. 'Cesar—please. This isn't a good idea.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'So what *is* a good idea? That you simply walk out on me? After what we did last night? Just like that?'

'Um—isn't it the simplest thing to do? Isn't it for the best?'

He gave a laugh. It was light, but there was an edge to it.

'The best? Rosalind, *querida*, I will tell you what is for the best.' He paused minutely, then looked at her. Just looked at her. 'You are.'

His eyes held hers. She couldn't move, couldn't pull her gaze away from his.

'And if you think,' he went on softly, 'that I am going to let you just walk out of that door and go, you must be dreaming.'

He threw back the sheet and Rosalind, with a gasp, saw that he was fully, completely aroused. He smiled and walked purposefully towards her.

She couldn't move. All she could do was stand there as he walked towards her, his naked body bronzed and honed and so absolutely perfect that she could not believe a man could be so incredibly made.

He stopped in front of her. She dragged her eyes from his body to his face. His eyes had darkened, pooling with arousal. She drowned in them, feeling her body quicken, her breasts tighten.

He held out a hand to her.

‘Come,’ he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

CESAR lounged back in the padded patio chair, the movement parting the edges of the short towelling robe he had thrown on when he had finally finished making love to her. She could see the fuzz of his chest hair and, if she glanced further down, all too much of the naked length of a thigh.

His body was so strong...She found herself thinking. Remembering.

Warmth enveloped her, warmth and a blissful post-coital languor that made it almost impossible for her to move from where she was sitting on the chair opposite his, her feet curled up under her legs, wearing nothing but Cesar's discarded dress shirt from the evening before. Her hair tumbled wantonly over her shoulders.

She *felt* wanton. Deliciously so.

She reached forward for her coffee cup. How extraordinary to think that she'd sat here last night drinking coffee and thinking, really believing, that she would be going home without making love with Cesar Montarez...

I'd have missed the most incredible experience of my life!

Regret? How could she? All she could regret was how short a space of time she would have him. He had granted her a reprieve, taking her back to bed when her resolve had been to leave—leave while she had the mental strength to do so.

But now? Oh, now it was too late. Far, far too late.

Far too late for anything but to be grateful that this had been given to her. Too late for anything but to go on sitting here, hazed in happiness.

She went on gazing at him as she sat curled up, the coffee cupped in her hands. His eyes were closed, face slightly tilted into the warm morning sun, which bathed its radiance down on him. In repose she could see the planes of his face, the high cheekbones, the long, long lashes, the slash of his nose and the sensual shape of his mouth, the dark, raffish shadow around his jaw. A breath of wind feathered the silky blackness of his hair.

Her breath caught, and she felt something flutter inside her, like something being born.

All my life. All my life I will remember this...

Her gaze slid onwards, over the tops of the bushes and trees and out—out to the dazzling sunlit sea beyond. The beauty and glory of Spain came over her again, and she remembered how she had first seen it, standing on the balcony of their room in that luxury hotel near Marbella. They had just stood there, both of them, and gazed in wonder.

Sadness tinged her eyes. No, she must not be sad. That time was past and her life had moved on.

Just as this moment would soon be gone.

But not quite yet.

As her gaze went back to Cesar's face she realised that he had opened his eyes a fraction and was watching her.

'I want you again,' he said softly.

They made love yet again. This time, at Cesar's instigation, in the shower. It was, Rosalind realised as he drove into her, as she splayed back against the tiled wall, water douching over her head and slick, readied body, the most erotically charged experience of her life.

And as she descended with long, shuddering spasms from her orgasm, she felt it was a fitting crescendo to her brief time with Cesar.

Was it the natural draining of her hormones after sexual congress, or the bleak realisation that now, finally, this magical interlude had come to an end that filled her with depression? Or was it that Cesar, refreshed now, satiated, had quite obviously moved on from the mentality of lovemaking.

He had stepped out of the shower, seized a bathtowel and wrapped it briskly around her, and then taken another one for himself. Now he was shaving, with swift, sure movements, legs slightly apart, wearing his towel like a low-slung sarong around his hips. He was totally focused on what he was doing, moving the razor with deft experience. She was combing through her tangled hair with her fingers, gazing at him in this strange, tuggingly intimate situation, trying not to feel wave after wave of depression batter through her.

It was over. Cesar Montarez was getting on with the new day. He'd done with making love, he'd been refreshed and revived, and now his busy life was ready to resume. Deals to close, people to see, orders to give, money to make.

And her life had to take over again, too. The dream had ended, right here in this luxurious bathroom, and outside the door she would have to get dressed again, put on her evening gown, and head across the lobby to be put into a taxi by Cesar—he would do that at least for her, she knew, not leave it to one of his staff to escort her off the premises. He would kiss her lightly, tell her that it had been great sex—or something to that effect—and wish her well. Then he'd step back, the taxi would move off, and she would leave El Paraíso for ever.

Sable would think her a certifiable idiot for accepting her dismissal so easily, but there was no way Rosalind was going to try and cling to a man who had taken her to paradise and was now returning her to reality. She was simply grateful for what she had had.

She would not be greedy, wanting more. She must not—even though inside she felt a hunger for him that she feared might never be satiated. But what was the point of that? He was not for her—not for any longer. Instead she would put a brave face on it—what else could she do? She'd had a wonderful, magical time. She had no regrets—how could she? Her only regret was that it was over, and she would never, in all her life, see Cesar Montarez again.

Something stabbed at her—pain and loss. That—*that* was the true price of a one-night stand, she thought sadly. Not the cheapness of it—but the expense. Far dearer than she wanted to pay.

She finished detangling her hair and got to her feet from where she'd been sitting on the rim of the bathtub. In the bedroom she busied herself dressing. It felt daft, as well as forlorn, to be putting on an evening dress at this time of the morning, but it had to be done. Just as leaving Cesar Montarez—for ever—had to be done.

A hand gripped around her heart.

But I want more! I want so much, much more! I don't want to go—I want to stay. I want to keep the dream. Just a little longer...

She zipped up her dress with angry speed. Well, tough, she told herself. You can't have him. It's over. There's only one thing you can do now and that's go gracefully.

She lifted her hands behind her neck, and started to plait her hair. It would dry on the way back to the café. It would crinkle dreadfully—but so what? She didn't need it to look good for anyone.

A longing went through her so powerful it was like a blow—for it to be twenty-four hours ago, for her time with Cesar Montarez to be still waiting for her. But she'd used it all up, that brief time.

It would never come again.

The hand gripped her heart again, hard and unforgiving. She felt her throat tighten.

The bathroom door opened. Cesar, stark naked, clean-shaven, was using a handtowel to ruffle his hair dry. His honed, muscled body made him look like a god. Rosalind felt her mouth go dry with longing.

As he set eyes on her he stopped dead. A frown creased his brow.

'What did you put that dress on for?'

Taken aback, she could not answer straight away. Then she said the first thing that came to her, guessing what his words must have meant.

'I...I'm sorry. I thought you were getting dressed as well.'

Did he mean them to go to bed again?

His frown deepened, as if her words made no sense.

'But why put on evening clothes? I will ask the hotel boutique to send up a selection of daywear for you—you can pick what you like.'

She shook her head, mortified. 'Cesar, that isn't necessary. Please, I don't mind going home in last night's clothes. It doesn't bother me.'

'Home?'

'Well, the café. I live over it. I get the room free. Señor Guarde likes someone on the premises at night.'

He walked up to her, took her shoulders, and turned her around. Then, with one swift, decisive movement he undid the length of her zip. Then he turned her back to him.

'Didn't I tell you, *querida*—' his dark eyes looked down dangerously into hers '—that this was not a one-night stand?'

She was floating. Floating right off the earth. Soaring up into the stratosphere.

Cesar Montarez still wanted her! He was keeping her with him! Oh, she didn't know for how long—she didn't care! All she cared about was that the dream wasn't over. She had a little longer to live in this magical world with the most devastating man of all time, who could melt her bones with a single touch...

She hugged her joy to herself in a haze of disbelieving happiness. Everything, *everything* was like magic! Oh, the magic would wear out, she knew—how long did Cesar keep his women? she wondered. A few weeks? A handful of months?

She didn't care! Whatever she got of him would be precious to her, and she would relish it, revel in it, as a God-given gift that she had never asked for, never expected—but had received, blessing on blessing, all the same.

And it was a blessing in more ways than one—as Cesar Montarez's live-in lover she would be safe from Yuri Rostrov. He was *persona non grata* at El Paraíso.

The final cause of her happiness shafted through her again. There had been only one cloud on the haze of her sunny bliss when Cesar had made it clear that whatever he wanted her for it was not a one-night stand...and that had been the thought of Yuri Rostrov and the money she owed him.

But even there she had been granted a reprieve! As unexpected as Cesar making it clear he wanted to keep her longer had been the thick envelope that had been handed to her as she'd made her way across the casino lobby out to the taxi waiting to take her back to the café to get her things.

'Your winnings, Señorita Foster,' the man had said with deferential politeness. 'From the roulette table.'

Wonderingly, Rosalind had glanced inside—and gasped. There had been a wad of notes inside! But how? Surely she hadn't been playing with real money? But the notes were real all right. Had she won then? She'd thought she'd lost—was she wrong? But surely she couldn't accept her winnings, not when it was Cesar who had staked her? She ought to tell the man there had been a mistake.

But the words had died, unsaid. Into her mind had sprung the most wonderful, liberating thought. She knew exactly what she would do with the money! It would dissolve the last impediment to her enjoying this wonderful, irresistible invitation to share Cesar's life for a brief, blissful time. So she'd merely smiled at the man and slid the envelope into her evening bag, then walked out to the taxi, her feet as light as air.

On her way back to the casino she'd stopped off at the bank and paid all the money—far more than three months' worth of her usual meagre repayments—straight into Sable's account. Doubtless Sable would think she'd got it from her new rich lover. Rosalind couldn't help smiling wryly. But wherever it came from it should, as Sable had told her, serve to placate Yuri for long enough—until Cesar called time on her and she had to go back to her penny-plain life in the café.

But till that happened—oh, till then!—she was going to soar on wings of bliss. In the arms of Cesar Montarez, the most wonderful man in the world!

Cesar looked down at the woman lying asleep in his bed. A sense of deep satisfaction went through him. Rosalind Foster was proving ideal. It wasn't just that she was so stunningly beautiful—with the kind of beauty that he still found so beguiling that he hadn't even begun to be bored with it yet, even after six weeks—but also that she was the easiest-going woman he'd ever known.

She never threw tantrums, never made demands, was never pettish or sulky—was always sunny-tempered and cooperative. The expression in his eyes changed. Not that she was some kind of cipher—she could certainly argue with him, all right! But only when they were talking about world affairs, or culture, or history. His expression shifted again—when there was the last time he'd discussed such things with a woman? No dumb brunette, she!

As if subconsciously aware of his perusal she started to stir, her graceful rounded limbs moving slightly. Even though she was still asleep, her movement was sensual. That was cause of yet more satisfaction. Rosalind Foster was the most sexually satisfying woman he'd ever had. There was an ardour, an intensity about making love with her that he had never experienced with other women—as if she was able to draw him deep within her own searing experience so that he caught fire from the intensity of her heat. And burnt in the same sensual, white-hot furnace...

And afterwards...The expression in Cesar's eyes softened. Afterwards, when he held her in his arms—that was better than with any woman he'd known. She would cling to him as if she were welded to him, as if she clung to him for her very existence.

And that felt good.

Very good.

And there was something else about Rosalind Foster that made his affair with her so different from all his others.

She wasn't forever asking him for things! So many of the women he had known were always on at him to spend his money on them. Some were subtle, some wheedling, some seductive—but the purpose was all the same. To get him to open his wallet for them. But Rosalind was different. Oh, she let him buy her clothes, but she never went on about having nothing to wear or desperately needing a new handbag or other expensive trifle! She didn't even seem to like gambling. After that first evening she'd never gone near the tables, even though he'd made it clear he would happily stake her. But she never asked him for anything.

Of course he spent money on her anyway—especially clothes—he wanted to. He wanted to see her natural beauty enhanced to the limit with fabulous clothes. She looked such a knock-out when she was dressed up that it took his breath away.

He gazed down at her wonderingly. Was she really not mercenary? he pondered. If so, she was a novelty out here!

Perhaps he had simply grown jaded and cynical over the years, seeing so many women chasing money, wherever it was, whoever had it. Maybe these days he simply expected all the women he encountered to be devoted to getting and spending other people's money, including his. Picking their lovers for their wealth and what they could buy them, the luxury they could keep them in.

But not all women were like that...

And maybe Rosalind Foster was one of that rare breed.

He went on looking down at her as he slept, and something pulled at him.

He wished he knew more about her. It wasn't that she was evasive, precisely, about her background, more that she just didn't volunteer anything—even in casual conversation. He still knew almost nothing about her. His only surmise was that she'd come out to Spain with a man—

But that was obviously over now. History. So was her unwelcome association with Yuri Rostrov. He'd made his own enquiries and the man seemed to have left Spain and taken his dubious girlfriend with him as well, the one that had got Rosalind mixed up with Rostrov in the first place. Cesar could only be relieved—no way did he want those two coming near Rosalind again, or her having anything more to do with them. Just the memory of how he'd first seen Rosalind hanging on to those gangsters brought a bad taste to his mouth. But she'd vowed she wanted nothing more to do with them, had looked horrified at the thought, and he believed her. He trusted her. She had no links to Rostrov anymore. None.

He went on looking down at her, turning over his thoughts, wondering what he really felt about the woman lying there, who had brought such satisfaction to his life. And then slowly, because he wanted to, he reached his hand out and drifted a finger through her hair.

She stirred again at the slight sensation, and then a moment later her eyelids were flickering open. As they lighted on him the expression in their sea-green depths touched something in him.

'Hello,' she said softly.

He smoothed her hair. About one aspect of his affair with Rosalind Foster he did not have to wonder—she was the most desirable woman he'd ever possessed. As he gazed down at her lovely face, her even lovelier body, he felt himself stir. He wanted to make love to her—but now was not a good time.

'I apologise for the early start, but we need to get going. I have to be in Mahon for lunch.' His voice was husky. He was regretting the need to be up and about on business already.

She smiled, lifting herself up against the pillows.

'I'm not complaining,' she said, in that smiling voice. 'I've never been to Menorca. Do you still think we can spend any time there?'

'I'm due back in Marbella for a meeting in the early evening tomorrow, but we can have till then in Menorca, *querida*,' he replied accommodatingly.

'That would be wonderful!' She smiled, but there was the slightest shadowing in her eyes. He knew what had caused it—mentioning Marbella.

It was the one place she didn't like going to—that and the Alhambra. The former didn't surprise him too much—Marbella was not to everyone's taste, and Rosalind had made it clear she preferred the quieter places on the coast, what few were left. Her favourite place of all, he knew, was his retreat up in the hills above El Paraíso. That she adored—and that, too, marked her out from his previous women, he mused. The likes of Ilsa Tronberg found the *castillo* he was painstakingly restoring far too remote and primitive—they wanted the flash fleshpots of the Costas, not the crumbling antiquity that was his own personal, private project. But Rosalind had gazed around with open pleasure in her eyes at the ruined, lonely splendour of the place the first time he had taken her there, and laughed off its current lack of luxury.

'It's wonderful!' she had breathed, and he had found himself telling her of its history, of his plans for it, to restore it as a beautiful remote hideaway. She had entered into his ideas, readily seeing the vision he'd painted for her. He had taken her all over—along the old crumbling ramparts and into the dim, mote-filled interior just crying out to be brought alive again. And she had stood by the tower window, gazing out over the valley below to the blue sea just glimpsed beyond.

But that Rosalind would not let him take her to the Alhambra *had* surprised him. She had already visited it before, she'd admitted, but it was not a place to see only once in one's life, and besides, it had been years since he'd last been there himself. He'd have relished taking her around the palace that was, to his mind, one of the greatest glories of Mediterranean civilisation—as well as one of its most romantic places.

But when he'd suggested it—weeks ago now, in the early days of their time together—she'd looked away and shaken her head, and seemed visibly reluctant. He'd let it pass and not suggested it again.

Had she been there with this mysterious man she had come out to Spain with? Had they lived in Marbella? Was that why she didn't like the place?

A stab went through him, and he identified it with a sense of shock. It was jealousy.

That, too, was something different with Rosalind Foster. He'd never felt jealous, never felt possessive of any of his other woman.

But the thought of Rosalind Foster in the arms of another man—however long ago!—made him seethe.

As he watched her now, getting out of bed, unfolding her tall, queenly body, and heading yawningly for the bathroom, he felt again that deep feeling of satisfaction go through him.

And a shaft of desire.

The siesta he'd promised himself after his business lunch in Mahon seemed a frustratingly long time ahead. For a brief, impulsive moment he felt the urge to follow her into the bathroom and ensure that her shower woke her up very, very thoroughly indeed. Then, with a regretful glance at his Rolex, he put the thought aside. He'd just have to wait until siesta time...

But he'd make up for it then. Frustration was always the best aphrodisiac.

Puerto Banus, the most expensive part of Marbella, was buzzing with beautiful people—as it always was. The tourists were there to gawp as well. If you wanted to see seriously rich people in action, thought Rosalind, this was the place in Spain to do it. The cost of property here was astronomical—and as for the price of the yachts moored in the harbour, she couldn't even begin to put enough zeroes on the numbers.

Not that she wanted to. She didn't like being in Marbella—it held too many memories.

But Cesar had business to do here, and she had made no demur when he'd told her they would have to stop over for a night before heading back to El Paraíso, further along the coast.

She'd have followed Cesar Montarez anywhere on earth.

Just thinking about him made her heart glow. These weeks with him had been a season in paradise.

She had never been so happy! Not even when she had first come out to Spain. For that time, even though she had been overjoyed finally to have arrived, had been haunted by sadness, the sorrow that was yet to come.

And come it had.

Her eyes shadowed and she shut away the memories—for what was the point in remembering? Remembering would make her sad, and that would simply waste this precious time she had now, with Cesar Montarez.

A hand squeezed at her heart. Pain was waiting for her again, she knew—the pain of loss. Oh, this loss would not, *could* not be so bad, for Cesar Montarez would still be alive, living his golden life, graced with yet another beautiful woman at his side, and then another, and another.

And she would be left far behind, with nothing but memories.

And the hideous mess of being up to her neck in debt to a gangster.

Cold fingers squeezed at her. She didn't want to think about owing Yuri Rostrov so much money. She didn't want anything of that ugly, sordid world of gangsters and their molls touching what she had with Cesar. Spoiling it.

There had been no sign of Sable or Rostrov—Rosalind couldn't help hoping they were still in the South of France, anywhere but Spain. She wished Sable well, despite the life she led, and would always be grateful to her for helping her out over her loan, but discovering she'd passed it on to Yuri had appalled her. She shuddered. Cesar thought she was free of the gangster, had nothing more to do with him. But what if he found out about her owing him so much money? Well, she bolstered herself, he *wouldn't* find out. There was no reason for him to find out. *She* would never tell him—no way did she want that crushing burden spoiling this precious time with Cesar. Her brief, precious time. That, one fine day, would end.

For it would, of course. One day he'd realise he was bored with her, would see another woman to pursue, and Rosalind would be severed from his life. Not cruelly, not harshly—for he was not a cruel, harsh man—but for all that he would put her aside. Just as firmly as he had put aside that Nordic blonde when his fancy had lighted upon herself instead.

She wished with all her heart that it was not so. In her waking hours she felt the terrible temptation of daydreaming of a life in which Cesar Montarez was not doomed to become nothing more than a precious memory. Of a life in which she was part of *his* life, for ever.

She put such longings away. She must not allow herself to dream of such things. She would be no such thing to Cesar Montarez.

She was just the woman he took pleasure in for this brief time. One woman in a long, long line, she knew, and there was nothing she could do about it except enjoy the time he allotted her and make the most of being with him while she had the chance.

And that was why she would follow him wherever he went, do whatever he wanted—for the chance to stay a little longer with him.

Her breath caught—oh, but Cesar Montarez was everything she wanted! All she wanted! She still couldn't get over the way her life had simply been turned upside down—everything swept away by him!

How had she come to be having this affair with him? This consuming, compulsive affair from which she could no more walk away than she could leap off a cliff and fly?

How was it that every time she saw him, *every* time, her breath caught and her heart turned over and she just wanted to gaze and gaze at him, helpless and enthralled? How was it that when he wasn't there, in the same room as her, she felt a yearning, a longing, just to see him again. Waiting for him to walk through the door.

It was everything about him—*everything*! The way his dark hair feathered on the nape of his neck; the way his dark eyes looked out at the world; the way the lines flared from his nostrils to the edges of that beautiful, sculpted mouth; the way that mouth would quirk and make her throat tighten; the way he moved, walked, with that feline ease; the way his hands, so beautifully shaped, would splay out when he talked; the way he stood still, leashed with that poised, powerful grace; the way his long, silky lashes would lower over his eyes as he glanced across at her...and looked, and looked...filled with desire for her...

She could feel her heart-rate quicken just thinking of him.

And when she looked at him, touched him, kissed him, made love with him...

Wonder broke through her. She had never known, never imagined just how incredible sex could be! Had never known how it could consume her, devour her, inflame her with a passion that was incandescent in its burning heat. Cesar Montarez could melt her with a glance, a touch, and she would make herself his irretrievably, passionately, devotedly.

'*Querida*?' The sound of Cesar's voice interrupted her blissful reverie. 'Have you finished making yourself beautiful yet?'

There was humour in his voice and his eyes flickered over her as she paused in the act of feathering on a final touch of mascara. She met his eyes in the reflection in the mirror as he stood lounging against the doorjamb, and felt, as she always did, that familiar thrill go through her that he was still here with her, still in her life—and she in his.

'Almost,' she answered. 'But don't rush me when I'm doing mascara, or it will smudge, and then I'll have to start my eyes again from scratch.'

His teeth gleamed in a smile. 'You don't need make-up to look beautiful.'

She gave an answering smile. 'But it helps.'

Long lashes swept down. 'Oh, yes, *querida*, it helps, all right...'

There was a drawl in his voice that made her skin quiver.

The dark eyes went on washing over her.

'That dress,' observed Cesar, 'is spectacular.' His gaze took in the full glory of the sea-green gown, shot through with gold thread that shimmered in the light.

Rosalind felt a shiver of unease go through her, countering the delicious thrill that always went through her when Cesar looked at her in that particular, oh-so-speaking way that told her so totally, so utterly, that he desired her deeply.

He had insisted on taking her shopping that afternoon, telling her that Marbella was a show-off sort of place, and that anyway he wanted to see her in something new. The evening dress he'd bought must have cost him a fortune—nothing so sordid as a price-tag had been attached to it!—and although she couldn't disagree, knew that it did indeed make her look spectacular, she still did not feel comfortable about it.

That Cesar Montarez was rich was undeniable—but having him spend his money on her made her feel bad.

It wasn't just that he seemed to take it for granted that the current woman in his life would expect him to lavish expensive clothes on her, but that a part of her desperately wanted to accept. Oh, not because she wanted the clothes themselves—or wanted him to spend his money on her. No, it was because she knew—with that shiver of unease that would, if she let it, turn into fear—that unless she did her best, her very, *very* best, to look as gorgeous, as fantastic as she could, then her time with Cesar would be even more limited than it was going to be anyway.

So that was why she let him dress her in designer clothes, why she went endlessly for beauty treatments and fussed over her appearance—because she knew that she must look as good as she possibly could to hold his attention. The shimmer of fear went through her again. After all, she was surrounded by fantastic-looking women all the time now—done up to the nines, perfectly turned out in one designer number after another... How could she possibly hope that Cesar Montarez would not be distracted by one of them, and compare her unfavourably to those glittering birds of paradise that flocked to this expensive lifestyle?

She put the finishing touches to her make-up, checking one last time that she had done everything she could to make herself look good, and stood up.

Cesar was ready to go, looking as lean and lithe in his superbly cut tuxedo as he always did.

They headed downstairs. Cesar had booked a suite in one of Marbella's top hotels, and now they were heading off to wine and dine at one of the resort's top restaurants.

To her relief, it was not one that Rosalind knew. She didn't want to go anywhere that would hold more memories than she could bear.

This place was clearly extremely fashionable, crowded with expensive people. Nevertheless, Cesar was treated with kid gloves by the staff. But as they took their place at a table in the bar, Rosalind carefully sweeping her skirts as she sat down in the low armchair, she saw Cesar tense and look past the waiter who had just taken their order for drinks.

Rosalind followed his line of sight, and her stomach clenched with dismay.

CHAPTER SIX

SEATED sideways at the bar, wearing a mauve cocktail dress so short it almost showed her crotch, was Sable. And beside her, his back to the rest of the room, looking as heavy-set and flashily dressed as when she had first seen him, was Yuri Rostrov.

The dismay in Rosalind's stomach chilled to icy fingers as her two worlds collided.

She glanced covertly at Cesar. He'd recognised the gangster, no doubt. His eyes came back to her, and she forced herself to try and wipe the look of dismay from her face. Something of it must have showed, however, for he nodded briefly, as if acknowledging the reason for it.

He got to his feet.

'We'll dine elsewhere,' he told her. 'I don't want that scum anywhere near you.'

He held out his hand to draw her up, but at that moment Sable's gaze shifted slightly and lighted on Rosalind. Astonishment blitzed across her face, and she slid off the barstool.

'*Ros*, I can't believe it!' Sable's London-edged voice jarred in her ear. 'I almost didn't recognise you!'

She headed towards them, face alight—her gaze slipping immediately past Rosalind to Cesar. Her eyes widened.

'Sweetie,' she cooed, her voice slightly slurred, 'you jammy, jammy thing! So this is your gorgeous man! No *wonder* you couldn't say no to him!' Her over-made-up eyes roamed greedily over Cesar, then glanced back at Rosalind, taking in her designer gown and pricing it to the last euro. 'You *have* hit the jackpot! *Loads* of money *and* sex on legs! Clever girl!'

She glanced coquettishly up at Cesar, flicking back her long blonde hair with a full wattage smile of blatant invitation. 'Hi, I'm Sable—and *you*,' she breathed, the scent of alcohol on her breath, 'are just *too* hunky to resist. And I bet...' she leaned forward, pressing her long purple-varnished nails against his lapel '...you are just *dynamite* in the sack!'

She glanced back to Rosalind and murmured lasciviously, 'How about lending him to me tonight, sweetie? I could really, really do with a good Latin lay!'

She gave an inebriated giggle and moved to press against Cesar. He caught her wrist and held her off, not roughly, but decisively. His face was a mask.

Rosalind wanted to sink through the floor.

But no such mercy was allowed her. Instead, worse followed.

Before she could stop her, Sable was talking again.

'Listen,' she continued, opening her eyes the widest yet to gaze up at Cesar. 'I just want to say—' her false eyelashes swept up and down '—how really, really glad I am that Ros is with you. I told her she was an idiot not to sort herself out! Someone like you is the answer to all her problems!'

A small, killingly polite smile parted Cesar's mouth. 'Rosalind has problems?'

Sable opened her mouth, despite Rosalind's furious signalling with her eyes, but at that moment she was saved—and yet plunged into an even worse ordeal.

Yuri Rostrov was approaching them.

Automatically Rosalind dropped her head, hoping against hope he might not recognise her. Surely she looked different enough tonight from the way she had that ghastly evening? On the other hand, with Sable flagging her up like a spotlight, she didn't hold out much hope.

'Señor Montarez.' The heavily accented utterance of Cesar's name was not a question or an acknowledgement, but a statement.

Of their own volition Rosalind's eyes lifted to the two men. Yuri Rostrov might not be as tall as Cesar, but his bulk made him seem bigger. Yet when her eyes slid across to Cesar she saw, in his poised, controlled stance, a leashed power that reminded her all over again of the impression he'd made on her when she'd first seen him. That Cesar Montarez could be dangerous when he wanted to.

He answered the gangster with a brief nod. Two males, thought Rosalind, squaring off, assessing each other—deciding whether to fight or pass each other by this time. She tensed automatically, feeling a rush of fear for Cesar. However dangerous he might look, he could be nowhere near as dangerous as a gangster...

'You're far from your home turf, Montarez,' Rostrov went on, in heavily accented English. Sable had moved automatically from Cesar, and was plastering herself against Yuri with a cooing smile. He ignored her. 'Or do you own this place too?'

'No—but I'm...well-acquainted...with the owner.' Cesar's tone was light, but Rosalind could hear the warning in it.

The other man nodded, as if he'd expected that answer.

'So, tell me—from your personal experience of the habits of the Spanish police—do they have this place under surveillance, too?'

There was the briefest flash of a smile, like a stiletto blade, as Cesar answered. 'Not yet, Señor Rostrov. But who knows when they might choose to take an interest? And if they do—' he gave a shrug '—even legitimate businessmen can fall under suspicion.'

'Unfortunate,' said Rostrov heavily. 'However—' he looked Cesar right in the eye, giving him his message loud and clear '—as a legitimate businessman myself, Señor Montarez, I understand your concern.' He gave a curling smile, showing his gold teeth. 'Tell me, are your blackjack tables profitable these days?'

Something gleamed in Cesar's eyes. 'That depends. Some guests...get lucky.'

The gangster laughed, pleased to have made his point. He might have been thrown out of El Paraíso, but he'd made Cesar Montarez pay. Now he spotted another way of getting at him. His eyes moved on to the woman at his side, and Rosalind realised with a cold feeling that he recognised her perfectly well.

'Classy, Montarez,' he approved, but with a baiting tone in his accented voice. 'Very classy. She might look respectable, but you and I both know where you saw her first. For all you've spent on her, she's just a class-act whore—that's all.'

The fist came from nowhere. It connected with a sickening crunch on Rostrov's temple. He keeled over, hitting the floor with a thud that shook the furniture, and lay still.

Conversation in the entire bar area halted abruptly, and every head turned to stare.

Cesar's teeth bared in a gritted smile. He stared down at his handiwork. He'd reacted on pure impulse, and he didn't regret it. At the periphery of his vision he could see Rostrov's half-naked tart standing with her painted nails pressed against her mouth in shock. As for Rosalind, she was simply frozen immobile.

He glanced beyond her. A waiter was hurrying forward, but he was being overtaken by one of the discreet, but clearly visible bouncers. Ignoring the shocked stares of the other patrons, Cesar stepped up to the man and spoke rapidly, but quietly. The man glanced down at the prone, unmoving figure of Yuri Rostrov, clearly a whole lot heavier than the man who had laid him out cold, and raised his eyebrows in tribute.

‘Nice shot,’ he said in Spanish.

Cesar grinned. A real grin this time. He rubbed his fisted hand with the other one, his knuckles now feeling their impact with Rostrov’s skull.

‘Put him out with the garbage,’ he said brusquely.

‘I think perhaps, Señor Montarez,’ murmured the bouncer, ‘an ambulance might be more appropriate.’

Cesar nodded curtly. He turned his attention back to the two women. Time to dispose of Sable as well—but a little more gently. He didn’t want her anywhere near Rosalind. He slid his hand inside his jacket. Taking out his wallet, he slipped out some high-denomination notes and handed them to her.

‘Time to go,’ he told her briefly. ‘Preferably abroad. Portugal’s nice this time of year.’ He nodded at the waiter. ‘This lady needs a taxi—see to it.’

The man bowed hurriedly and headed off.

Sable took the notes without blinking. Heavily lashed eyes opened wide at him and she gave him an expressive look. ‘Portugal’s *so* expensive,’ she murmured plaintively. ‘And Yuri could be really generous, you know?’

She sighed heavily at the prospect of giving up her unsavoury but cash-rich lover.

Cesar got the message. Silently he peeled off some more notes. She took them without a flicker, but he could see her assess the amount and find it persuasive. Worth giving up Yuri for and clearing out.

With a sidelong glance at Rosalind, who was still standing there looking choked, she said with another bat of her eyelashes, in an intimately low voice to Cesar, ‘I’m just *so* glad Ros wised up and took up with someone like you. She’s *such* a looker—I always knew she could do brilliantly if she just put out. With her looks she could pull any bloke, however rich! She was mad to bury herself like that—especially after she’d lived the high life once before! At least I can leave her knowing you’ve fixed everything for her!’ She ran a forefinger along the lapel of Cesar’s tuxedo, leaning suggestively closer. ‘I envy the knickers off her for having a bloke like you—money *and* looks! You just do not *know* how hard they are to find together!’

She gave a heavy sigh, as if life was harder than anyone could imagine for females like her. Cesar lifted her lingering finger away from him, his expression arrested.

‘Let’s not meet again,’ he murmured, quite expressionlessly.

Sable gave a little trill of laughter and sauntered off, tucking away her money into her satin evening purse, her bottom wiggling provocatively. Cesar spared neither it nor the supine body of the unconscious gangster on the floor a glance.

He wanted out. Now.

He held out a hand to Rosalind.

‘Come,’ he said peremptorily. It was not an invitation.

He had things to ask her.

‘So—that was the female who got you involved with Rostrov?’

Rosalind stiffened. ‘I was not *involved* with Rostrov. I told you that.’

‘Well, perhaps *involvement* is too strong a word for it.’ The sarcasm was audible in Cesar’s voice. ‘I doubt he gets *involved* much with his whores!’

‘That’s a vile thing to say! Sable isn’t a whore!’

Cesar made a derisive noise in her throat. He was angry. Angry that someone like Yuri Rostrov had come within a million miles of Rosalind. And angry that she had ever gone anywhere near him. Even as a favour to a so-called friend, who was no better than a *putana* and in no way deserved Rosalind’s friendship.

‘She doesn’t walk the streets—but that doesn’t stop her being a whore. What would you call her?’

Rosalind didn’t answer, and looked away. She didn’t want to think about Sable. Didn’t want to think about Yuri Rostrov. Didn’t want to think about anything to do with the whole horrible evening. And she didn’t want Cesar talking about it. Not now, not ever. They’d left the restaurant and come back to the hotel. They’d eat in their suite, Cesar had said. Rosalind didn’t care. She had no appetite—just a sour taste in her mouth.

She wanted Cesar to drop the subject. But he didn’t.

‘So,’ he prompted, ‘what would you call her? A slut, maybe?’

‘I don’t want to talk about Sable!’ Her voice was tight.

‘No? Well, she wanted to talk about *you*, all right.’

His voice had changed. There was challenge in it. And more—the same note that had been there the first time he’d seen her, offering her a lift and warning her against keeping company with East European gangsters. She’d told him then she was a fool, not a tart—she wasn’t about to defend herself again over her own criminal folly!

She rounded on him. ‘Look, I don’t care what she said about me! Sable is not my bosom buddy!’ Guilt stabbed at her for disowning Sable, but she couldn’t bear Cesar thinking she shared her values.

‘You just helped her out that evening, “babysitting” Yuri Rostrov—that’s what you called it.’ The challenge was still there. So was that note of disdain. ‘And you should care what she said about you. You really should.’

She stared.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked slowly.

His dark eyes were veiled. A question had formed in his mind. He didn’t want to ask it, but he had to. He felt it forming on his mouth, refusing to be silenced.

Demanding answers.

‘Why are you with me, *querida*?’

Her eyes snapped in a frown. ‘What?’

‘You heard me. Why are you with me? What’s keeping you here?’

He wanted an answer. Wrong. He *needed* an answer. Time to find out just what Rosalind Foster meant to him—what he meant to her. Something was lashing inside him and he needed answers.

She bit her lip, looking away.

‘That’s such a pointless thing to say. You know why I’m here,’ she answered, her voice low.

‘Do I? Show me. Show me exactly why you stay with me, *querida*.’

There was challenge in his voice. In his stance.

Her eyes went to him. He was standing foursquare in the centre of the reception room of their suite. Masculinity rippled from him like waves of dark gravity, sucking her to him. He was the most beautiful man in the world, the most breathtaking, the most devastating. His eyes glittered and his mouth was held in a taut, tense line.

Desire leapt in her like a tiger, taking her by the throat.

She knew right now *exactly* why she was here with Cesar Montarez.

Because she could not get enough of him.

Whatever else she wanted, whatever daydreams tormented her waking hours, whatever else she might so secretly long to be to him, she was at least this: the woman he desired. Who desired him.

She walked up to him. Felt the folds of her fabulously expensive dress rustle around her limbs. Felt the prickling in her breasts that presaged the onset of desire. Felt that desire seep out from the core of her being and start to fill her veins with its sweet, intoxicating addiction.

She could feel her breasts swelling, her nipples hardening. Feel the rush to her head, her body. Feel the heat spreading from her core, flushing outwards.

Like a fire. A flame running.

He watched her approach. Stood stock still. He felt his body surge as she walked towards him, this fantastic woman who turned him on, and on, and on...

She stopped in front of him. He could see her nipples standing out under the fine, expensive material of her bodice. See her lips part, the pupils of her eyes dilate.

‘Show me,’ he said.

His voice was low. It was not an invitation.

For one long, timeless second she went on standing there, quite motionless, while the flame ran within them both. Then, in a single fluid gesture, her hands went to the back of her dress and sliced down the zip.

The dress fell from her like a discarded husk. She stood in its folds, her breasts full and engorged, straining from their low-cut bra. Between her legs, a low, insistent throb had started up.

‘This is why I’m here—’ Her voice was low, the words almost a hiss—urgent, irrefutable. ‘This is why.’

She held his eyes, held them with a twisting, writhing thread that held him to her, held her to him. Desire ran along the thread, twisting, writhing...

For one more long moment he went on standing there, challenging her challenge. And then with a jerking movement he reached forward, hooking his finger up under the central panel of her bra and tugging her towards him.

Excitement shot through her. Hot, vivid, searing.

He saw it flare in her eyes, and his eyes lit with savage pleasure. With a swift, urgent movement he used each hand to run up each bra strap and hook it down, over her shoulders, and then, just as swiftly, just as urgently, he peeled the loosened bra off both her breasts simultaneously.

Her breasts spilled out into his waiting palms, full and engorged. As he filled his hands with them she gave a sharp breath of raw pleasure, her head lifting back, spine arching forward instinctively. A low laugh broke from him and he closed his fingers over each pulsing nipple, scissoring them.

She gasped again, feeling the exquisite pleasure of his slicing stimulation. He pressed forward against her, feeling her back arch even more as she thrust her breasts into his relentless caress. He lowered his head to her ear.

‘Show me more.’

This time it *was* an invitation.

And she showed him everything. Everything about why she was with Cesar Montarez. Everything. With all her body. And much, much more than that.

They lay entangled in each other’s limbs, clothes scattered all over the carpet, on the long sofa that was all they’d been able to reach as the conflagration of desire had sheeted through them until they possessed each other to the ultimate degree.

Rosalind’s body was damp with sweat. She was still wearing her stockings and suspender belt, but nothing else. Cesar was totally naked. His tuxedo lay in a crumpled heap on the floor.

They said nothing, still coming down from the inferno they had both bathed in, like salamanders writhing in the fire that would give them life. Beneath the palm of her hand she could feel the heated surface of his torso, the staccato rise and fall as his heartbeat slowly began to normalise. Her face was buried in his shoulder and he hung on to her closely, folding her half across him, their legs splayed together.

‘*Dios,*’ he breathed slurringly, as though taken to an exhaustion he had never before felt, ‘what is it that you do to me?’

She could not answer, merely moved her mouth tiredly across the skin of his throat. They lay unmoving, wrapped in each other’s embrace.

Cesar felt as if a hurricane had passed over him, through him, and he was only now emerging into the still weather on the far side.

But not calm weather.

There was something inside him—knotted still, tense still. She had given him satiation as she always did, and this time more than ever, almost more than his body had been able to bear, but the sense of deep, abiding peace that she brought to him this time was not there.

‘Rosalind?’

His voice came from nowhere. He had not intended to speak, and yet he knew he was going to. Had to.

Again she did not answer him, but he felt her tense. He knew why. He had tensed, too.

‘What did Sable mean—that you had problems I could solve for you?’

For a third time she did not answer. And this time the tension in her body was palpable. Then, finally, she spoke.

‘Sable believed I needed a man. She considered my abstinence...unnatural.’

She was lying. He knew it. Knew it with his knowledge of her that had somehow, in the weeks they had been together, gone so deep it lay beneath his skin.

Something cold went through him.

As if she realised it, she lifted her head and looked straight down into his eyes.

‘Cesar—why do you pay the slightest attention to what Sable said to you? I told you she isn’t a bosom pal. She’s just someone I know.’

‘Someone you know well enough to want to “babysit” Yuri Rostrov for?’

His voice had that challenge in it again. It angered Rosalind. Angered her because Sable and her horrible, horrible gangster-protector were poisoning her rare, precious time with Cesar.

‘I don’t want to talk about her! I don’t want to talk about that gangster of hers!’

And, above all, she didn’t want to talk about her ‘problems’—like owing Yuri Rostrov thousands of euros.

She peeled herself off him, feeling cold at her separation from the warmth of his body.

She felt bad. Bad that she had lied to Cesar. Bad that he was questioning her about a part of her life she wanted to have nothing to do with this magical, wonderful time with him, but which was reaching out to it, polluting it, poisoning it.

And as she got to her feet, realising that she was still wearing her stockings and her suspenders, as if she were something out of a porn magazine, she felt a wave of revulsion go through her—as if Yuri Rostrov’s vile words had polluted *her*. Making her behave like the tart Cesar had first thought her—stripping off for him like that just now, and then coupling with him on the spot...

She made for the bathroom, locking the door, refusing to look at herself in the mirrored walls, simply peeling off her stockings and belt as fast as she could, and tossing them into a corner. Then she twisted her hair up into one of the hotel’s courtesy shower caps and stepped under the sluicing water.

Ten minutes later she felt better. She’d overreacted; she knew she had. Cesar had hated that exchange in the restaurant as much as she had—why else would he have thumped Rostrov?—and it was her fault that it had happened. Her fault for knowing Sable in the first place. Her fault for being so hideously in debt.

She’d lied to Cesar instinctively about what Sable had meant about her ‘problems’. She wanted to keep that side of her existence totally, completely apart from what she had with Cesar.

And what did she have?

The question formed in her mind as she stepped out of the shower, enveloping her body in a huge, fleecy towel and discarding the shower cap, shaking loose her hair.

What did she have?

She sat down on the stool in front of the vanity unit, staring at her reflection. Her long dark hair cascaded over her shoulders and her still fully made-up face looked incongruously back at her, where she sat with the towel wrapped around her like a sarong. She pushed back her hair with her hands and reached for her make-up remover.

As she steadily wiped the make-up from her eyes and face the question kept going round her head.

What did she have?

Sex, she thought. I have sex. Bucketloads of it. Fantastic shedloads of it. Sex like I’ve never known before. Will never know again. Sex that has blown my mind away and turned me inside out.

But it was more than sex.

Well, of course it was more than sex, she told herself impatiently, wiping a cotton pad over her eye with smooth, regular strokes. It had to be more than sex. Because why else would she feel as if Cesar Montarez was the most incredible man in the world—whether or not he was making love to her? Why could she not drag her eyes away from him? Why did her heart lift when he came into a room and she saw him again? Why did she want to just sit and stare and stare at him, drinking him in? Why did she crave him like an alcoholic craved whisky? Why did the thought of the day when Cesar Montarez would be done with her fill her with a dread that made her feel as cold as ice?

Why did she indulge in such futile, hopeless longings and fantasies about him—seeing herself at his side for all her life, his wife, the mother of his children...?

Because you're in love with him—

The cotton pad stilled in mid-air. She stared at herself transfixed, completely unseeing.

Her breathing had stopped. Her heart had stopped.

No!

Denial rang from her. No! She was *not* in love with Cesar Montarez! She couldn't be. She *mustn't* be! She just mustn't!

There was no *point* falling in love with him! This affair wasn't about love—it couldn't be. It just couldn't!

But it is. You're in love with him.

The words came again, relentless, remorseless. With all her strength she tried to push them away, unhear them. Refuse to admit them.

And then, as if a dam had broken, the flood overwhelmed her. She bowed her head, weak with the rushing emotions racing through her body.

She *was* in love with him! She was in love with Cesar Montarez! It poured through her, unstoppable, a drowning tide of emotion that swept her away.

The realisation was overpowering—as if day had suddenly dawned with a blaze of sunlight in the middle of the night. A second sun burning forth.

She sat and stared. Stared at her reflection, huge-eyed.

I'm in love with him. I'm in love with Cesar...

How long she sat there she did not know. It might have been two minutes. It might have been an eternity.

Love took time away and made it meaningless.

There was only one, slight impediment.

Cesar did not love her back.

As she went on sitting, staring at her reflection but not seeing it, she felt the chill, sobering truth lap at her feet. Cesar did not love her.

And why should he? This affair wasn't about love. How could it be, when it was only going to be temporary—as temporary as all his other affairs? Not made to last. Timed to run out, fade away, be replaced.

No, it was nothing to do with love...certainly nothing to do with her unasked-for unwanted love...

He must never know!

Resolution fired through her. It was the only thing she could do—never, ever give him a chance to find out what she felt for him. He would not want her to love him—would find it a nuisance. An embarrassment. Totally unnecessary to what he wanted from her.

No, there was no point in telling him she loved him.

None at all.

They ate in the suite. Rosalind didn't bother to dress, simply swathed herself in a heavy kimono Cesar had bought for her at one point, its long, silk-lined sleeves trailing on the ground as she ate.

It was a most flattering garment, even without the traditional high-waisted cummerbund. Instead she simply pinned it loosely to one side, and let it fall over her body. As for Cesar, he had merely put on his dressing robe, after clearing away his clothes and hanging up her discarded dress.

Rosalind was glad. It had not brought good luck, that dress. Guilt winged through her. It had cost a fortune, and now she never wanted to wear it again...

Dinner eased the situation between them. The familiar ritual of drinking wine, eating delicious and expensive food, brought things back to normal, Rosalind felt. Gave them both time to recover, to put aside that vile, polluting incident with Sable and Rostrov.

They talked about history. Nothing to do with what had happened in the restaurant bar. Only things that were long, long gone and could do no more harm to anyone, living or dead. They were talking of El Cid, that great medieval warrior, who had sometimes fought for the Moors as well as the Christian kings.

'All I know about him is from the Hollywood film,' said Rosalind. She was glad to talk about such impersonal things. Somewhere locked safely inside her was the discovery she had just made about her feelings for Cesar Montarez. But they were far too dangerous to do anything with other than keep them tightly locked inside a box. She must not open that box. It was too dangerous. Too pointless.

So instead she talked of history. Safe, dead history.

'It used to be on at Christmas—on TV. The ending was wonderful—so sad, yet so moving. Where they tied his dead body to his saddle and sent him out at the head of his troops—riding out of history and into legend.'

Cesar smiled wryly. 'For Hollywood, it was a good film,' he conceded. 'It glossed over a lot, but then a film must always do so. A film cannot be history—it can only be an expression of history. So you watched it at Christmas, did you?'

It was rare, incredibly rare, that she talked about herself before she'd met him, except in the most general terms, such as her love for history. To hear her mention her childhood was unheard-of.

'Well, that's the way I remember it. It was a very long film—good for winter afternoons.'

Cesar took a drink of wine. 'Did it make you want to come to Spain? Tell me,' he went on, not missing a beat, 'why will you not visit the Alhambra with me?'

She stilled. 'I...I...Well, I've seen it. I'd rather see other things, I guess.'

'Who with? Who did you see it with?'

Why was he asking her this? Why did he want her to tell him what he did not even want to know? Except that he *did* want to know it. He wanted, *needed* to know all about her—everything. Even her past lover.

So that he could discount him and stop agonising over him.

She took a forkful of seafood.

‘Someone,’ she answered. Someone who was gone, who would never come again. Someone it hurt too much to think about—even now.

Cesar looked at her. ‘Someone you came to Spain with? Someone you left England with?’

She swallowed. ‘Yes. Cesar, why are you being like this?’

Inside, she felt the box creak, as if the thing inside it wanted to come out. But she must not let it out.

He set down his glass suddenly.

‘Because I don’t know you, Rosalind. I don’t know anything about you.’

His dark eyes looked into hers.

She dipped her head instinctively.

‘There’s nothing to know, really. I’m just very ordinary. The only thing special about me is you, Cesar.’

She wanted him to smile. Wanted to see that quirking tug at his lips that he did when she amused him. But he didn’t. Danger pressed at her. If he went on asking her things he might find the box—the box she had locked so tight within her chest.

‘Is it?’ His voice was light. But she was not deceived. ‘And why do you say that, *querida*?’

‘Because it’s true.’

‘And why? Why am I special to you, as you claim?’

There was a probing tone to his voice. A challenge again. She felt danger prickles. She mustn’t let him find out what she felt for him. It would achieve nothing—except her speedy departure from his life. Cesar Montarez did not want her in love with him. He wanted her the way he wanted all his women to be—complaisant, adoring, undemanding.

Certainly undemanding of his love.

‘Cesar, I—I...’

She wanted to answer him. She really did. But she couldn’t. Somehow she couldn’t. She could feel tears starting in her eyes. She didn’t know why, knew only that she couldn’t sit here while Cesar Montarez interrogated her as to what he meant to her. It was too much, coming after that horrible scene with Sable and Rostrov. Too much, after that shattering new self-knowledge that she had had to crush down inside her, a secret never to be told—her love for Cesar.

‘Cesar—’ Her voice was choked, her vision blurring. She blinked and felt tears oozing, welling over her lids and catching in her eyelashes.

She dropped her head, her hand going to her forehead. She pushed back from the table.

‘Please—I...’

She tried to get to her feet, but he was there before her, crouching down beside her and taking her hands in his.

‘*Querida!*’ His voice was stricken. ‘Don’t cry. Please, don’t cry!’

Her head bowed over as she hunched forward.

‘I’m sorry. I don’t mean to. I’m sorry. But it’s been such a horrible, horrible evening...’

At least she could say that. Nothing else, but that at least.

He put his arms around her. Cradling her against him.

‘Don’t cry, *querida*. It isn’t worth it. *They* aren’t worth it. It’s over now—all over.’

There was such tenderness in his voice that she wanted to weep out loud. A hand clutched at her heart. She clutched at him in response.

‘Oh, Cesar!’ she cried into his chest. ‘You are the best, the very *best* of men!’

She felt him smile into her hair, then he got to his feet.

‘Let’s finish dinner, Rosalind *querida*. Then go to bed.’

She sniffed, and looked up at him with teared eyes.

‘Yes, please,’ she said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS wonderful being back at El Paraíso. Though travelling with Cesar was bliss—except for Marbella—what Rosalind loved best was being with him in his apartment at the casino. It almost felt like home.

She wished she could feel that way for real about his *castillo* in the hills, a thousand years away from the developments on the coastline.

She loved the *castillo*. Had loved it from the moment she had set eyes on it, with its ancient, half-ruined walls, as Cesar drove around the punishing hairpin bends and precipitous roads that led back from the coast up into the hills.

She loved it not just because it was beautiful in its own right, perched up so high like an eagle's eyrie, but because Cesar loved it.

It was his place, she knew. The place he was at home in. The place that was his, his alone, and did not belong to El Paraíso. Something that would long outlast them, as it had outlasted so much history already.

Yes, she loved it—but she could not be at home in it.

For that very reason—because it was Cesar's home, where the heart of him resided.

And that meant it was not for her.

Instead she made do with El Paraíso—and that was an easy task. She felt safe here, safe from the sordid, horrible world of Sable and Yuri Rostrov—they couldn't reach her here. Not that there was any sign of either of them. Maybe Yuri had gone chasing after Sable—though it seemed unlikely. Whatever—she didn't want to think about them until she had to, when she would have to resume paying back Yuri the gruelling remainder of the money she owed him, little by painstaking little. Till then she was free of him. And till then, all she wanted to do was revel in being with Cesar—while she had him.

He seemed to have completely put aside what had happened at Marbella. The strange mood that had come upon him in the aftermath of that ugly scene had vanished. He seemed to accept once more that she simply didn't want to talk about her life before she met him, to accept their affair for what it was, not seeking to probe her reasons any more.

And why should he? She strove so hard to be exactly what he wanted. Asking for nothing, accepting whatever he wanted to do. Wanting nothing but to ensure that her time with him was as wonderful, as magical as possible.

And yet...their relationship had changed.

Or rather—she had.

And she knew why. It was because she knew now that she had fallen in love with Cesar.

She tried desperately to hide it. Knew that Cesar would be appalled to know that a woman who was simply an ornament in his life, a graceful, beautiful, easy companion, in bed and out of it, was in love with him. He hadn't asked for that. Would not want it.

And because she wanted Cesar to have everything he wanted from her—because that way he would keep her with him just a little longer—she knew she must never impose her feelings on him.

And yet it was so hard to hide them...

Her love for him blossomed like a flower within her, touching every part of her—every part of her that touched him. She felt it like a sweet fragrance in the air she breathed, felt it lift and carry her on wings.

But it was a bittersweet thing. For while it made her time with Cesar glow like a jewel, it would also, she knew, exact a far harsher price from her than she had thought she would have to pay when the day came that Cesar Montarez replaced her in his life.

But there's nothing I can do about it. I love him—it is that simple. That irrefutable. That unchangeable. And when the pain comes I will have to accept it. I have no other choice.

But until that day comes I will stay with him. Accepting everything. Regretting nothing.

‘So you finally made it!’ There was humour in his voice, as well as mild reproof.

‘Don’t nag. I’m here, aren’t I?’

Cesar tapped his watch. It clung damply to his wrist. His whole body was lightly sheened with sweat, and his muscles, pumped from weights, were sleekly contoured and beautifully displayed, thanks to his skimpy running top and shorts.

Rosalind flexed her shoulders. ‘It’s no good, Cesar—I’m useless in the mornings. I can’t do a thing before breakfast.’

‘Running would wake you up. It’s the best time of day to be out.’

She cast him a jaundiced look. ‘Yeah, right. And it’s the best time of day to sit on the terrace and drink coffee—not hare like a lunatic between the palm trees.’

He gave a laugh and looped his towel around her neck, coming up to her. She caught the masculine scent of him and wondered how it was that a man who had just finished a two-hour workout could be so appealing to the senses. But she knew that the only thing on Cesar’s mind right now was a hot shower and getting his feet under his desk. As for her, she would do a leisurely workout herself, here in the hotel’s fantastically appointed gym, to loosen and warm up her muscles, and then head for the training pool. Swimming was her preferred exercise, not jogging.

He kissed her lightly, then let her go, unlooping his towel.

‘Work hard,’ he told her. ‘Keep that fabulous body of yours in peak condition for me!’ His grin took any sting from his words.

‘Likewise,’ reminded Rosalind, and her eyes ran over his corded body, which looked fit enough to win a medal just by standing there.

‘For you—anything.’ He smiled down at her. Then, with a brief, ‘See you for lunch,’ he loped off, pausing to have a word with Manuel, the on-duty instructor, before heading for the showers.

He felt good. The endorphin high from exercising was streaming in his body, and his tired but warmed muscles felt tuned, like a well-maintained engine. He would have liked to stay and watch Rosalind do her own workout—all that bending and stretching she did was very scenic!—but he had a lot of work to shift this morning. The joint project that Pat O’Hanran had proposed looked good—mutually good—and he was progressing it with all speed. The monthly accounts were due on his desk this morning, and he had his managers’ meeting scheduled for this afternoon.

In his office, Mercedes, his secretary, handed him his coffee and drew his attention to any mail that he needed to know about. Nodding his thanks, he reached for the phone.

Life was good. Life was very good. El Paraíso was thriving, his new ventures looked more than promising, and the restoration of the *castillo* was proceeding apace. Soon it would be time to give serious thought to the interior décor. Rosalind had already made some enthusiastic suggestions, and he liked the sound of them.

Rosalind.

He paused in jotting down notes in the margins of the architect's report he was reading.

That was another reason life was good.

Very good.

He still didn't know what it was about her that made life so good for him. Oh, he could go through the obvious stuff—she was fantastically beautiful, incredibly easy company, and unbelievable in bed! And since they'd come back here to El Paraíso this week she'd been even more devoted than ever—more ardent, more...more everything. The very idea of finishing with her seemed absurd—he had no intention of parting with a woman who was so perfect for him.

And she *was* perfect for him—quite perfect. Everything he could want. So why—a frown played in his eyes as he stared out of the wide window to the palm tree tops beyond—why did he even *think* of questioning that perfection?

Was he questioning it? If he was, why?

The frown deepened. Just giving thought to it seemed to bring it to life and make him realise that, yes, he *was* questioning it. He knew he shouldn't, but he was. So why? Why couldn't he just accept and enjoy the bounty in his life that was Rosalind Foster, the most satisfying woman he'd ever known?

But who was Rosalind Foster? The question came again, and he knew that that was what he was asking. He still knew so little about her—even after all his time together with her. Was that what bothered him? But why should it? He had no right to be bothered by the vague but persistent evasion she maintained about her past life. He had no right to be jealous of past boyfriends—however much he wanted to be! He'd accepted—of course he had!—that she'd come out to Spain with a former lover, and that that was why she didn't want to revisit old haunts like the Alhambra and Marbella.

Marbella. His mouth thinned. That had been a bad call. Encountering that scum Rostrov and that tart of his not been life-enhancing. The only good thing about it had been the chance to take his fist to Rostrov and lay him out cold.

Anger seared through him when he thought of what the man had called Rosalind. With no call for it—none.

Are you sure?

The doubt pricked in his mind like a mosquito bite. He splatted it away, but it whined back, biting again.

How much do you really know about her? She was no virgin when she came to your bed.

Well, why should she have been? The days when women were precluded from having a pre-marital sex-life were long gone—even among Spanish women. He didn't live like a monk—why should Rosalind have lived like a nun? And she obviously hadn't. She'd come out to Spain with a lover—but having one previous lover didn't make her promiscuous, let alone what Rostrov had called her.

The mosquito of doubt whined again, not leaving him alone.

A phrase hovered in his memory. Something that girl of Rostrov's had said. What was it? He paused, trying to hear it again.

'She was mad to bury herself like that—especially after she'd lived the high life once before!'

The frown came to his eyes again. Another memory intruded. The sight of Rosalind walking towards him the night she'd come to him at the casino—wearing a dress a million miles away from that tart-skin she'd sported with the gangsters.

He'd been totally focused on her breathtaking beauty, and his sense of triumph that she'd finally come to him—but now he thought about it again that had been no off-the-shelf frock. He didn't know the designer off hand—it was not something he paid much attention to in women's clothes—but that it sported a designer label he'd have gone bail on.

How could she afford a dress like that, working in a café?

Obviously she couldn't. So equally obviously she had once enjoyed a less constricting lifestyle than working in a café. Sable's words echoed in his head.

'—she'd lived the high life once before!'

Who with?

Lover-boy, it was obvious. Mr Mystery. The man she wouldn't talk about.

But, whoever he was, he'd had money. Money enough to buy her a dress like that black evening gown. Money enough to give her 'the high life'.

Well, so what?

With a rasp of self-exasperation Cesar picked up his fountain pen again. It was hardly a crime having had a boyfriend well-heeled enough to buy her a designer dress! *Dios*, hadn't *he* showered her with designer clothes? She had a wardrobe full of them, and looked a knock-out in every outfit!

Is that part of your appeal to her? That you buy her designer clothes?

That damn mosquito whined again in his ear, seeding its doubts.

He swatted it again. No, he wouldn't do this. Wouldn't pick away at what he had with Rosalind as if there was something wrong beneath the surface. There was no reason, no good reason for having doubts about her.

She might wear those clothes, but she never asked for them—and she certainly never hankered after jewellery, wouldn't even let him give her any...

No, he knew what his appeal was for her. It wasn't his money—it was *him*. She'd made it clear—totally clear—when he'd challenged her that night, in that angry aftermath at the hotel suite in Marbella, just what it was about him that made her stay with him. She'd shown him with every touch of her fantastic, incandescent body.

Just as she showed him every minute they were together, in bed or out—her visible pleasure in his company, her constant devotion to him, the way her eyes lit up when he looked at her.

That was why Rosalind Foster was with him. No other reason.

None.

He knuckled down to his work again.

'Señor Montarez? I'm so sorry. You have a visitor in Reception who does not have an appointment.'

Cesar looked up from studying the costings for his share of the O'Hanran project. Mercedes was standing in the doorway, looking apologetic.

'Who is it?'

'A Señor Rostrov.' Her face was expressionless.

Cesar stilled. His instinct was to give a decisively negative answer, but that might not be wise. Rostrov could be dangerous, of that there was no doubt, but he did not fear the man—not this far from his own territory. Rostrov could not afford to break the law here in Spain, or he would face deportation or worse.

So what did he want?

There was only one way to find out.

Slowly, he sat back in his chair.

'Show him up,' he told Mercedes.

The gangster entered the office a few minutes later, treading heavily. For a moment the two men levelled their gaze at one another. Cesar's expression was unreadable.

'Señor Rostrov,' he intoned evenly.

His uninvited guest gave a curt nod and sat himself down, unasked, in the chair opposite Cesar's desk. He spread his large gold-ringed fingers on the arms.

'I have a matter to settle with you—it concerns your...' Rostrov paused, then said deliberately, 'Woman.'

Cesar tensed.

The other man continued.

'I'm a generous man, Montarez, which is more than you should expect—' He rubbed at his temple consideringly, to convey the required message. 'So I'm going to go easy on you. If you want the English brunette, keep her. But sort this first.'

He reached inside his jacket pocket and drew out a thick, folded piece of paper, tossing it onto Cesar's desk.

Cesar could feel the adrenaline running in his body. It made him want to launch himself forward at Rostrov and beat him to a pulp. But he restrained himself. Something else was running in him—an emotion he could not name. An emotion that was starting to twist inside him like a newly hatched snake.

Slowly he pulled the paper towards him, unfolding it.

He read it at a glance, and as he did so he became completely motionless. When he looked up at Rostrov his face was totally expressionless.

Rostrov smiled. An unpleasant, gratified smile.

'Well, well, so you didn't know? Didn't know her dirty little secret. Didn't know that she's up to her pretty little neck in debt to me!' The gangster's voice was baiting.

He leaned forward, making his point. 'Let me tell you like it is, my friend. However classy they look, they like the high life, these whores, and they put out to keep it! Only sometimes they overspend—like this one did. Ran up credit she couldn't pay off. But I sorted it for her. And now you can sort it for me. Surely it's worth that much to stay between her legs? After all, it's what she's putting out for you for! Oh, don't worry

—’ he gave an unpleasant smile ‘—she didn’t put out for me to meet her repayments—she’s not to my taste. I like them blonde—like the one I woke up *without!*’ he finished menacingly.

Cesar ignored the final jibe. It was an irrelevance that he had bankrolled Sable to do a runner. Everything was an irrelevance—except the piece of paper in his hand.

He saw his hand reach into his desk drawer, take out a key.

‘You’ll prefer cash, I take it?’ he heard his voice saying.

Rostrov smiled complacently, his mission accomplished. He’d got his money—and humiliated Cesar Montarez into the bargain. The man had thrown a punch for the sake of a woman who’d made a fool of him.

Cesar went to his wall safe, opening the combination and counting out the money, handing it to Rostrov, all in the slow, deliberate manner of a sleepwalker.

The gangster slid the money inside his jacket and stood up. His eyes glanced around.

‘Nice place, Montarez. But it has its expenses...when I come to visit.’ He gave a fat, satisfied smile. ‘Enjoy the girl,’ he said softly. ‘You’ve paid for her.’

He walked out.

Slowly, Cesar sat down at his desk, his face still completely expressionless.

On the desk in front of him lay the piece of paper that Rostrov had tossed down.

Damning Rosalind Foster without hope of exoneration.

Rosalind groped for the shampoo bottle and squeezed out a large blob into the palm of her hand before massaging it into her hair, leaning slightly out of the rushing water in the shower. She would need it cut again. As she worked up a lather with her fingers she made a face. All the endless beauty treatments and hairstyling she had to have to ensure she always looked perfect for Cesar might be necessary, but quite frankly they could be a total bore as well. They seemed to occupy so much time—and sometimes she could just wish the lot of them to perdition. But that was impossible—she couldn’t afford to take any risk whatsoever that Cesar might find her less than one hundred and ten per cent gorgeous—from pedicured feet to freshly styled hair. She had to be as beautiful as she possibly could for him.

Half an hour later, as she sat at the dressing table in their bedroom, she knew she should be pleased with the results of all her labours. Dressed in a superbly cut cream linen shift, her lightly tanned skin flawless, her hair glossy and swept back from her face in a ‘natural’ look that had taken fifteen minutes of painstaking blow-drying, and with just a touch of eye make-up and lipgloss to bring out her features, she knew she looked as good as she could.

Her body felt taut and toned after her workout and swim, and she knew Cesar was right to nag her to keep fit. Not that she didn’t enjoy it once she got going. And, after all, it was the only work she had to do these days. Her life was one of total sybaritic leisure, with nothing to do but make herself look beautiful—and bask in Cesar Montarez’s company.

A perpetual dream time.

For as long as it lasted.

She picked up her cream leather clutch bag with its designer logo clasp, smoothed her shift over her legs, checked her appearance one last time, and headed for the door.

It opened before she reached it.

‘Cesar!’ she exclaimed. ‘I’m not late, am I?’

He shut the door behind him with a sharp, decisive click.

He was looking very tall, she thought. And as she looked again at him she saw that his face was sombre. More than sombre. Closed.

Completely closed.

‘Cesar—what is it?’ Her voice was faint.

He did not move. His dark eyes were expressionless.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, and his voice was remote, as expressionless as his eyes, ‘you would care to comment on this?’

His hand reached inside his jacket and drew out a folded piece of paper from the inside pocket. He handed it to her.

She took it with a puzzled frown, setting aside her handbag on the dressing table and unfolding the paper.

As she did so, she paled.

Her stomach plummeted.

‘Well?’

Cesar’s voice was terse.

She swallowed. Dismay flooded through her. Oh, no—no, no! Why did this have to happen! Why? She didn’t want any part of it touching what she had with Cesar! She wanted to keep it far, far away from what she had with him—wanted to keep it a million miles away!

‘How...how...did you...?’

Her voice failed her.

‘I had a visit this morning. From our mutual friend Yuri Rostrov. Considering our last encounter, he was very civil. But then...’ he paused. ‘He had a matter of business to conduct with me.’

Cesar’s voice was chill. As chill as liquid nitrogen.

Rosalind looked down at the piece of paper again. The one that spelt out in bald, horrible type exactly how much money she owed, and to whom. The zeroes blurred in her vision.

She lifted her eyes again.

‘I didn’t want you to find out.’ Her voice was calm—quite calm, really. Which was surprising, given the waves of dismay washing through her.

Cesar smiled. It made her stomach plummet again.

‘No? But I would have needed to find out very shortly, no?’

She stared at him, not understanding.

The smile came again, that curl of his lips that made her feel suddenly sick.

‘You must have realised that now Rostrov was back, knowing you were living under my protection, he would come calling—looking to me to clear your account with him. Or did you imagine that because I so gallantly defended your honour—’ the twist in his voice made her feel faint ‘—in Puerto Banus that I had seen him off for you?’

He gave a shrug. ‘But it hardly matters. You can rest easy now, *querida*—I’ve paid him off for you.’

Her intake of breath was audible. ‘Cesar—no!’

He smiled again, a smile that felt like a knife sliding across her skin.

‘Cesar—yes,’ he corrected her.

She shook her head. ‘Cesar, please—don’t be like this! I know it’s a shock to you, and I’m sorry—I’m really, really sorry! I didn’t want it touching us, spoiling things for us! I didn’t want it to have anything to do with us! I didn’t even want to think about it!’

‘Really? The little fact that you owed Yuri Rostrov seven thousand euros was just something you didn’t want to think about? So how, may I ask, were you intending to repay him? There was only one way, wasn’t there?’ His voice was harsh, condemning. ‘The way you intended right from the start—to get me to pay it!’

‘No!’

His lip curled again. She flailed on. ‘Cesar, please—believe me! I never wanted you to find out—let alone pay it for me! Truly I didn’t!’

She gazed at him entreatingly. But his face still had that closed, shuttered look. As for his eyes...

‘Cesar...please...’

Her voice was faint.

‘Yes...’ he said drawlingly.

Anger was lashing at him like a whip, drawing blood, deep, deep inside. He’d been a fool. A blind, imbecilic fool! Thinking she was different. Thinking it was *him* she wanted, not his money. Yes, a fool indeed! But no more—*por Dios!*—no more!

‘I like that, *querida*. I like you pleasing me—wanting to please me. Because you do want to please me, don’t you? You’ve wanted to please me all along. You’ve been the most complaisant, attentive woman I’ve had—the most ardent, the most devoted, and certainly...’ the drawl in his voice was like the blade of a knife ‘...the most eager between the sheets. I used to wonder why. Was it just me, I wondered, who accounted for such devotion? Could I really be that conceited? It seems I could—that night in Marbella you went to huge pains to convince me of the reason you were with me! And it was convincing, *querida*—very convincing.

‘But perhaps,’ he went on, in that same drawling, killing voice, ‘you felt the danger of your friend Sable’s revelation—those hints about you. What did she call it? Ah yes—your “problems”. And now let me think—how did you explain that one away? Ah, yes—she disapproved of your lack of a man, that was it. Or should that be—’ his voice hardened suddenly, pitilessly ‘—your lack of a *rich* man?’

Her throat was tight, so tight she could not breathe.

‘No. No, Cesar—it isn’t like that!’

He rounded on her. ‘Then what *is* it like, Rosalind *querida*?’ he grated savagely. ‘Don’t you enjoy having a rich lover? You haven’t complained so far! You enjoy living here with me, enjoy all the clothes I dress you in, all the places I take you!’

‘Of...of course I do!’ She tried to fight back, but it was as if a drowning tide was rushing over her. ‘But that’s not what I’m here for! It’s you—*you*, Cesar! That’s why I’m here with you!’

‘Ah, I see.’ He exhaled slowly. ‘So it’s just the great sex? Is that what you’re telling me? That’s what you’re sticking around for? Just the sex?’

His dark, deadly eyes bored into hers, and she could not meet them. Hers slipped away. She was terrified—terrified that he might see in her eyes the truth of why she was with him, that she was so helplessly in love with him she was powerless to do anything except cling to him desperately for as long as she could.

Even when he was throwing such vileness at her!

He saw her evasion—felt her lie shimmer between them. And a blow went through him that was mortal in its extremity. The bile rose in his throat, overpowering him.

Dios, but he felt like a gutted fish. One moment he’d been gliding in smooth, untroubled waters, and then, in a few brief, devastating minutes, his world had collapsed all around him. When he discovered the truth about Rosalind Foster.

Why?

The question was not why she had played him for a prime sucker so skilfully, but why, *why* did it hurt so much to find out?

He’d known venal women before—they were everywhere wealthy men were to be found.

But I didn’t think she was one of them!

I thought she was different. I thought she was something more.

He tried to fight it, tried not to let himself be swept away on this floodtide of bitter anger. More than anger—something he wouldn’t give a name to. Must not give a name to. So he tried to fight it—

So what if she is just another female like so many here, on the lookout for wealthy men? Why should she be different?

The answer came to him, clear and harsh and mocking.

Because you wanted her to be different, that’s all! You were starting to weave fantasies around her, starting to think she meant something to you—that you meant something to her.

Well, you mean something to her, all right! You’re the sucker who was going to pay off her debts for her! After all, who else was going to?

Anger lashed him again, dragging on his skin with iron fingertips. He crushed it down. What was the point of feeling anger, feeling pain, feeling anything?

She was speaking again, her face contorting, but he cut across her. He couldn’t stay here any longer, with her bleating denial at him.

‘I’m lunching in town,’ he said curtly. ‘Then I’m in meetings for the rest of the day. We are dining on board the *Aurora* with the Henriques tonight. The launch will take us out at eight.’ His voice was clipped, impersonal.

Rosalind watched him walk out.

Pain clutched around her heart like a vice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHE spent the afternoon in the hotel's beauty parlour. Somehow it seemed the only thing to do. It was either that or go down to the beach and sit there, feeling like death.

What am I going to do? What am I going to do?

The question went round and round in her head. But she knew there was only one answer. She had to make Cesar listen to her! She had to make him see that she had never, *never* wanted him to know about the hideous mess she'd got herself into! And she'd never wanted him to pay her debts for her!

Her heart contracted. Dear God, now she owed the money to *him*! How on earth was she to repay him? There was only one way, she knew. She would have to ask him for a job of some kind at El Paraíso—waiting at tables, receptionist, chambermaid. Anything. She'd repay what she owed him little by little, the way she had Sable, when she'd worked in the café.

And maybe, maybe, if she did that, then he would be convinced that she didn't want him for his money...

She was still in her kimono when he walked into the apartment. It was barely half past six.

'Cesar! You're early. I'm nowhere near ready!'

She attempted normality. That would be the best thing to do, she had decided. Be as normal, as reasonable as she could. Defuse all that cold, contemptuous anger that had been pouring off him when he had thrown her debts in her face.

'You look ready to me, *querida*.'

She looked at him uncertainly. His voice seemed normal. It didn't have that chilling quality to it that it had had before. She gave a flickering smile, trying to read his expression, his mood.

He saw it, and it amused him. Or would have had he been in the mood for being amused. As it happened, he wasn't. He was in the mood for sex.

And Rosalind was in just the right state of undress for it.

During the afternoon, which seemed to have stretched endlessly as his managers droned on during their monthly meeting, as his accountants went through the figures with them, his mind had been miles away. And it had come to some very rational decisions.

Very rational.

Rosalind Foster turned him on. Turned him on more than any other woman he had ever slept with. OK, so it turned out she was in it for reasons of her own, but now he had had time to consider it those reasons were no impediment to what he wanted out of her.

Sex. That was what he wanted from Rosalind Foster. He'd wanted it the first time he'd set eyes on her, cavorting with Yuri Rostrov, when he'd thought her nothing but a cheap tart. Well, he hadn't been so wrong after all, had he? Except that he could delete 'cheap' and substitute 'expensive'. Rosalind Foster had cost him a lot.

Something stabbed inside him, but he ignored it. Rosalind Foster had cost him more than euros. He'd paid in quite a different currency.

And now it was her turn to start paying him back for the money he'd shelled out to Yuri Rostrov. Paying him back for destroying his hope that at last, at last he'd found a woman that wasn't like all the others who'd clung to him.

But she'd turned out to be just the same as the rest of them, after all.

Something lashed around his heart. He wanted it to be anger.

But it wasn't.

He slammed it away and substituted another emotion. A familiar one.

A safe one.

One that was good enough for Rosalind Foster.

Lust.

Rosalind stood stock still as he walked towards her. There was purpose in his approach, and she knew what it was. The look in his eye was very, very familiar.

She felt the shaft of excitement slice through her the way it always did. She tried to stop it—sex right now was not a good idea. They needed to talk. Sort things out. Make everything all right again.

But Cesar was in front of her, reaching out and with the back of his hand softly stroking down the side of her cheek.

His eyes were dark, hooded, with an intensity in them that told her that he wanted her—right now.

'Cesar...' Her voice came, wavering. 'We really need to talk—'

She got no further. His mouth closed over hers, opening it and moving in on her with arrogant possession. His right hand slipped inside her kimono and started to play with her instantly ripening nipple. He stood there, legs slightly apart, one hand pleasuring her breast, the other spearing into her long loose hair, while his mouth feasted on hers.

Her eyes fluttered shut and she moaned, helpless beneath his ministrations as he steadily, relentlessly aroused her. His hand slipped away from her breast and she felt the ache of loss, but it skimmed down her silken flanks, beneath the heavy silk of the unfastened kimono, and his fingers glided inwards to part her thighs and stroke the satin flesh within. She moaned again, deep in her throat, and she could feel him smiling into her mouth as his fingers grew more skilful.

She was flooding, flooding totally with the dew of desire, and her legs widened slightly of their own accord. She wanted more, more—

Suddenly, with an effortless flexing of his muscles, one hand curved over her bottom, the other hand around her back, and he hefted her up briefly into his arms, to take her across to the bed and lower her down upon the cover.

The unfastened kimono fell to either side of her, displaying her body to him. Fire licked all over her and she could feel her heart-rate racing, fast and shallow. She was in a state of extreme excitement, she knew, and it was blanking out everything else—everything except its own overwhelming, dominating need for satiation.

'Cesar—' She held out her arms to him, wanting to feel him come down on her, but he was discarding his clothes. Swiftly, concentratedly. Unknotting his tie and unfastening his shirt, shrugging off his jacket and

then, with swift, sure fingers unbuckling his belt and disposing of the rest of his clothes.

She watched his lean, honed body reveal itself, and felt desire leap in her throat again. She reached forward for him, running her hands along the sides of his torso, revelling in the strength of his corded muscles, then moving inwards to clasp at his aroused, steel-hard satin length.

His eyes glittered, and he came down on her without finesse, filling her waiting body so completely she felt she could take no more. But she wanted more—still more.

Her hips arched up to his, increasing his penetration, and he drew back and plunged into her again and again, with each stroke building the excitement in her. Her hands were clawing at the bedcovers and her hips were twisting up to meet his downstroke, her head rolling on the pillow. Her whole body was taken over. Nothing else existed except this endless, mindless building of sexual excitement.

Her orgasm shattered through her moments before his consumed him, too, in one last, driving, relentless thrust, exploding within her own pulsing, convulsing flesh, drawing him in to her. The unbearable surfeit of pleasure roiled through her every limb, every nerve-ending inflamed and burning.

It took a long, long time for her body to subside, as if it had reached a heat that had been beyond endurance. As the orgasm finally ebbed away from her her body felt over-sensitised, over-aroused.

She felt her hips twist sideways, trying to free herself from his slackening possession. She was free, but still she felt the throbbing of her internal flesh, aroused too much. When he moved off her her sweated skin was suddenly cold.

She lay supine, her breathing slowly normalising, almost shivering, the black folds of the kimono beneath her. She didn't want to look him in the eyes—something was stopping her.

Briefly, so briefly, she felt his hand on her flank—but then abruptly, instead of folding her to him, as he always did after lovemaking, he simply levered himself up and got off the bed. Still not meeting her eyes. She watched him walk into the bathroom, not looking back at her. Saying nothing.

Her mind was blank.

She heard the sound of the shower, and after a little while she got up, wrapping her kimono around her. She wanted to go into the bathroom, too, but felt she could not. Instead she picked up his clothes from the floor, hanging his suit in the closet, folding his underwear and socks into his shirt, ready for the laundry.

She still felt blank. *I've got to talk to him*, she thought.

But she couldn't think of anything to say.

They spent the evening on the yacht, *Aurora*, out to sea. It belonged to a French industrialist millionaire who'd recently stayed at El Paraíso, and who was now cruising the Mediterranean. It was a lavish affair, and the women were awash with designer gowns and jewels. Rosalind moved through them, aware she was drawing eyes because of her beauty and because of Cesar's company. Evenings like this, taking her place at Cesar's side, were nothing new; she'd been doing it since she'd first moved in with him. But there was something different about tonight.

Cesar was perfectly polite, perfectly affable—to her and everyone else. He laughed and chatted, part of the sophisticated crowd of wealthy guests, half talking business, half making innocuous small talk, in a mixture of Spanish, English and French, as befitted the cosmopolitan gathering.

Nothing much was demanded of Rosalind. All she had to do was smile and converse politely, inconsequentially, avoid the speculative look of males from time to time, and watch how much she drank. Champagne circulated endlessly, and then fine wines over the long and lavish dinner on the upper deck. She glanced across at Cesar. Was he drinking rather more than he usually did? Often he stuck to either white or red, but tonight she noted that he was drinking both, and he rounded off the evening with brandy as well.

She found herself hoping that the alcohol might relax him, make it possible for her to talk to him—really talk to him.

She had to bide her time, though. The motor launch back to the El Paraíso marina was hopeless—there were several other people present, for other wealthy guests had been invited to the yacht as well—and then there was the business of Cesar saying goodnight to them, as they made their way into the hotel. Finally she was walking at his side, up through the fragranced pathways towards the casino on the bluff above. Pools of light illuminated their feet at intervals, from cunningly set lamps along the way. In the bushes a chorus of cicadas chirruped incessantly in the warm night air.

Say something now, she thought. *Say something now!* Just say, Cesar, we need to talk—and start talking.

But she didn't. Instead she just walked at his side, not saying anything. Though he was not two feet away from her, Cesar seemed very remote. He had not taken her hand or put his arm around her shoulder. She could feel the distance between them.

They were inside the casino. The gaming rooms were still open, and business was brisk. Cesar turned to Rosalind.

'I'm taking a turn around the rooms. Go on up to the apartment.'

He walked away. For a moment Rosalind looked after him, then, with a small sigh, crossed over to the lifts.

It was at least an hour before Cesar came up. Rosalind had undressed, stripped off her makeup and showered, and she was sitting out on the terrace, reading desultorily. She hadn't put the kimono on. Somehow she didn't want to. Instead she was wearing Cesar's dark blue dressing gown and was curled up on one of the loungers, a table lamp from the living room beside her. An empty cup of coffee sat on the little patio table.

She heard the door open and close behind Cesar, and felt herself tensing. She heard him cross over to the drinks cabinet and there was the sound of liquid pouring briefly. He walked towards the open French windows, whisky glass in his hand.

He looked at her a moment. A long moment.

She met his eyes unflinchingly.

'Time for bed,' he told her.

She swallowed.

'Cesar—we have to talk. You know we do.'

Something moved in his eyes. 'Do we? What about?'

There was an edge of boredom in his voice.

'About the money.' It hurt to say it, but she had to. She just *had* to. 'I know you're angry with me, but you don't need to be.'

He took a sip from his whisky glass, watching her from the doorway. 'I'm not angry with you.'

His voice was indifferent.

She bit her lip. 'Cesar, please—don't be like this. It isn't the way you think.'

Suddenly, unaccountably, she felt her throat close. Tears pricked in her eyes. She tried to blink them away, but they came again.

Cesar didn't move. He went on looking down at her, framed in the doorway, whisky in his hand.

'Don't turn on the tears, *querida*. They fooled me last time—when you turned them on for me in Marbella, when my questions got too awkward for you to answer—but not this time. OK?' There was no anger in his voice, no emotion at all. He took another drink of whisky. 'So dry your eyes and come to bed.'

'Cesar—*please*—'

He moved suddenly, coming out towards her. He crouched down beside her, setting his whisky glass down. His eyes were dark. He took her hand.

'Stop this, *querida*. It isn't necessary and it's serving no purpose. We do very well together, you and I. Just because I found out you were lining me up to pay off seven thousand euros for you doesn't change that! I'm not about to throw you out just because of that! The amount is chickenfeed! Don't even think about it any more! But stop trying to tell me "It isn't the way you think, Cesar!"—just draw a line and close the subject.' He drew her to her feet. 'Like I said, it's time for bed.'

She looked at him uncertainly. She couldn't reach him. He'd made up his mind about her and that was that. And because of that she had a stark choice. She could insist on trying to explain—but with him like this she knew he would not listen. She could leave—walk out on him—call it quits. And she simply hadn't the strength to do that. Or she could stay and try and get through this, to the other side. Let him get over the discovery of her debts, do as he wanted and close the subject until it had ceased to be so sore within him, and then—then she could explain, get him to believe her.

She walked into the bedroom. Cesar followed her, shrugging off his tuxedo jacket.

'I need a shower. You, too.'

'I've just had one,' she answered.

His eyes rested on her. 'Have another one.'

She smiled uncertainly. 'OK.'

They needed somehow, anyhow, to break the unbearable tension between them. They'd made love in the shower countless times. It was a very erotic experience. But this time as they stood beneath the hot, pulsing water, as Cesar smeared her body with shower gel, gliding it purposefully over every limb, not saying a word, not touching her with his mouth, just palming gel over her breasts and bottom, and then lifting her up to impale her on his body, her spine pressed back against the tiles as she lifted her face into the water, gasping for air and ecstasy, it was too erotic. Too erotic when he disengaged, his body still fully aroused, hers shuddering in the aftermath of orgasm, and turned her around, pressing her palms against the tiles, parting her legs and pressing his own hands over hers, to pinion her body for him, then entering her from behind in strong, swift thrusts that brought her thunderingly to orgasm yet again—and himself as well.

For a moment they leant, collapsed against the wall, water pouring down over them. Then with a brusque flick of his hand Cesar cut the water and pulled out of her.

'Dry your hair,' he said, opening the shower stall door and reaching for a towel to give her.

She stepped shakily out of the shower, wrapping up her hair and taking another towel for her body.

She felt strange, dissociated. She had come down too quickly from the intensity of sexual arousal. She went into the bedroom, towel-drying her hair, wearing the other towel like a sarong, and got out her hairdryer. By the time it was dry again, a tumbled mass over her naked shoulders, Cesar was already in bed, a sheet pulled roughly across his hips and legs.

As she turned off the hairdryer and put it back in its drawer she could see that he was aroused again.

'Come here.'

His voice was low. It made her breasts prickle. She stood up from the vanity unit and walked towards him. She felt strange still. Sexual excitement was mounting again, but there was something different about it.

‘Get on the bed.’

She started to peel back the bedclothes to go in beside him, but he stayed her with a hand on her arm.

‘Lie down, *querida*. Face-down.’

His eyes had that dark glitter in them.

And suddenly, through the slicing sexual excitement that was knifing through her, another emotion forced its way.

‘No!’

The word broke from her and she shook off his hand.

‘No, Cesar! It’s not going to be like this.’

The glitter in his eye intensified.

‘Wrong, *querida*. It’s going to be any damn way I like. And right now I want you on the bed, face-down.’

His hand rounded her bottom, moving across the twin globes, a finger hovering over the top of the cleft between. Again, she felt that knifing of desire.

‘Spread for me, *querida*,’ he said softly.

Almost—almost she did. Almost she succumbed to the raw, overpowering eroticism of what he wanted. To lie there naked for him, displayed for him, face-down, legs parted, so that he could arouse her, and excite her, and—

The word came into her mind. Ugly, and crude.

And undeniable.

Because if she did what he wanted her to—now, like this—that would be what he would do to her. Not make love, not even have sex. But something not even animals stooped to in their natural urges.

Because only humans could take something as natural, as magical, as God-given as sex, and make it something crude and ugly. And worthless.

She got off the bed, wrapping the towel around her body protectively.

‘I said no, Cesar.’

Her voice was taut.

His face tensed, the glitter in his eye appalling her.

‘The word is “yes”, *querida*. It’s the only word I want to hear from you. “Yes, Cesar. Please, Cesar. Whatever you want, Cesar. Whenever you want.” Seven thousand euros worth of whatever I want...’

There was a tight, controlled savagery in his voice that made her feel sick.

‘You said—you said just now the subject was closed.’

He smiled. 'Well, so it is, *querida*. Unless, of course, I have to remind you. Like I'm doing now. But I don't want to talk about the money you owe me. I don't want to talk about why you never mentioned owing it to Yuri Rostrov. Why you told me—*lied* to me—that you had nothing to do with him anymore. In fact, I don't want to talk at all, right now. So come back here, *querida*, and do what I want.'

She shook her head, her breath tight in her lungs.

'No.'

His mouth pulled. 'Why not? You've enjoyed sex with me ever since that first time. We're good together—really good. That hasn't changed. And as for doing what I want—well, you always did that, too. I never knew a woman more accommodating than you, Rosalind, *querida*. So why balk now?'

She shook her head again. 'It's different now. You're making it different.'

His jaw tightened. 'No,' he said damningly, '*you* made it different. Not me. You. *You* were the one with the debts—not me!'

Her hands twisted in the knot of the towel where it strained across her breasts.

'Owing money doesn't make me a criminal! I never wanted you to find out about my debts! And I was never, *never* going to try and get you to pay a single cent of them! You don't have any right—*any* right at all—to make out that I'm some kind of whore! And that's what you're doing. But you've no right! I never asked you to pay a single euro back—you took that on yourself. I didn't ask you to! So cut it out—just cut it out! Because I won't put up with it!'

'Then don't, *querida*.' He met her defiance without missing a beat. 'Walk out—right now. Go out and pick yourself another rich lover. You've met enough rich men out there through me who'd be happy to take you on. Or you could always head for Portugal and pal up with Sable again.' His voice taunted her. 'You could work as a team.'

His words splintered through her. Each one needle-sharp.

She wanted to run. Run from the vileness of what he was saying to her. She wanted to throw herself at him, rage at him filled with fury.

But she fought past both urges. Fought to hang on to the truth that was deep within her. She loved him, and she would not let her debts—which were nothing, *nothing* to do with what she had with him—destroy this time she had with him.

She closed her eyes, standing there immobile as she let revulsion and anger drain from her. Then, opening her eyes, she lifted her head and looked across at him. He was still propped up on one elbow, his torso bronzed in the lamplight, his cheekbones stark, his mouth pulled taut.

'I'm not going to let you destroy us.' Her words were quiet. 'This time with you has been the most wonderful of my whole life. I didn't tell you about my debts because I didn't want to spoil it. I know it won't last for ever. I know you won't keep me long. I've known that from the beginning. I never thought anything else. I'm just one more woman for you. Up to now it's been wonderful. Magical. A memory I'll treasure all my life. And I'm not letting you ruin it, Cesar. If you think that all you've meant to me all these weeks is just as a wallet to settle my debts, then I don't want any part of it. I'll be your lover, Cesar. I won't be your mistress.'

She fell silent. He was watching her. Had she got through? She could not read his face. Then he spoke.

'That's good,' he said appreciatively. 'That's very good. Really convincing.'

Her heart sank. He believed nothing of what she had said.

'But you've been very convincing right from the start. And you've been playing me so carefully, haven't you? Never asking me for a thing. Making me think you were really different from all the other

women out here. And what were you going to do, hmm, when crunch-time came and Rostrov came for his money? As you knew he must, sometime, once he knew I was keeping you. Trot out some heartbreaking hard-luck story about just how you came to be seven thousand euros in hock to a gangster? Something that sounded a whole lot more tragic than just running up credit card bills you couldn't pay off! And how come you got landed with those in the first place, hmm? The rich lover-boy who brought you out here gave you a taste for the high-life? Was that it? That's what your pal Sable said you'd had!

He drew a harsh, mocking breath. 'Well, you've got your high life back again, *querida*, and, like I said, I'm more than happy to oblige, and even pay off Yuri for you. But I think, I really think, it's time for a little gratitude.' He patted the bed again. 'So come and thank me, *querida*...very, very nicely...'

The glitter was in his eyes again, merciless, unforgiving—and as she looked at him hope died.

His gaze washed insolently over her.

She turned her head away, and started to walk towards the closet. She didn't know what she was going to do. Reach for some clothes—the first to hand? Go downstairs? Outside? Anywhere? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. The weight inside her was crushing her. The sickness was choking her.

She slid open the closet door.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'Going.' Her voice came from very far away.

She did not look round, just reached inside the closet for a pair of trousers hanging there. The sound of his body jackknifing out of bed alerted her, and she twisted around just as he seized her shoulder. He took the trousers from her and flung them aside.

'You're not going anywhere!'

There was anger in his face. Whisky fumes on his breath. And something in his eyes that hollowed her out inside.

She backed away from him jerkily, dislodging his hand.

'Don't touch me! Don't—touch—me.'

She took another step backwards and bent to pick up the trousers, keeping her face turned to his, as if dreading he would move in on her again.

'I'm going, Cesar. I have to go.' She backed away again, till her legs bumped into the chest of drawers where she kept her clothes. She fished behind her, opening a drawer, pulling out the first top that came to hand.

He put out an arm to lean against the closed door. Quite naked. Superb in his nakedness. Something was dying inside her...dying.

'And the money you owe me?'

His voice was harsh.

'I'll pay you back. Little by little. Every month. I was going to ask you for a job at the casino, but now —' Her voice broke. She couldn't speak.

The lift of his eyebrow was cynical, his answer unspoken, and it angered her and destroyed her at the same time. She started to get dressed, her body moving mechanically. He stood and watched her for a moment. Then, with a rasp, he swore in Spanish.

‘Enough of this farce! You’ve made your grand gesture! Over the top as it was! Do you seriously imagine you’re going to waltz out in the middle of the night? Where the hell do you think you’re going to go at this time of night? Head down to the town to see if another rich sucker picks you up off the sidewalk?’

She ignored him, stepping into the trousers and zipping them up. Her heart was thudding like a hammer and she felt sick. Really sick. As she pulled the top over her head waves of nausea started to go through her. Oh, God, she was going to throw up! This was all she needed! Desperately she tried to think what she’d eaten for dinner. Lobster? Had that been it? It had been something with seafood in it—and a far too rich sauce?

Salt ran into her throat. With a strangled groan she bolted for the bathroom, hand over her mouth.

CHAPTER NINE

IT TOOK her a long, long time to stop retching, and when she did she felt like death. Weakly, she dragged herself upright, hauled herself to the basin, and washed her mouth out half a dozen times, trying to clear the taste from her throat.

Finally she lifted her head and stared at her reflection. She looked like death, too. Ashen under her tan, her eyes staring, mouth pinched.

Was it the sickness in her soul made manifest? She didn't care.

A loud rapping at the door came again. Cesar had been thumping on it off and on for the whole ghastly session. She ran the taps one last time, flushed the loo one last time, and wiped her mouth and hands on a towel.

Then she walked to the door and unlocked it.

'What the hell—?' said Cesar, his eyes working over her. He'd got dressed in the meantime, pulling on jeans and a sweat top. His hair was dishevelled, his chin rough with shadow, and he looked haggard.

'It must have been the lobster,' Rosalind said hazily, as a sudden debilitating weakness sapped her. Her legs sagged.

He caught her instantly. She felt weak as a kitten, and she leant against him as he carried her to the bed and lowered her down carefully. The room whirled around her head, and for a ghastly moment she thought she was going to throw up again. She hoped not—there was nothing left to come.

'You should drink some water,' he said. His eyes were watching her, but she couldn't read what was in them.

He turned away and went into the bathroom, returning with a glass of tepid water. He made her drink it, holding her up, and the feel of his body, holding her so carefully—but so distantly—made her want to weep.

He let her go as soon as she had finished the glass.

He got to his feet.

'I've called the hotel doctor. He'll be here any minute.'

She tried to shake her head, but it was too much effort.

'I'll be fine. It was the seafood.'

'Maybe.'

Her eyes rested on him. There was something odd about the way he'd spoken.

Awkwardness hung between them, tangible, like a rotting miasma.

The end of the affair, she thought, and felt a deep, abiding bitterness go through her.

She shut her eyes. The most bitter thing of all was that she could understand his anger with her. Feel his disillusion. How would she feel, in his situation, at discovering she owed so much money? Cesar Montarez was a wealthy man—and women who wanted a slice of that wealth were everywhere. It was the way of the world. Women made a living out of men who wanted to spend money on them—look at Sable. Whether you called her a whore or not was academic.

And what about me? What does it make me?

She'd enjoyed all the trappings of Cesar's wealth. Enjoyed the lavish lifestyle, the designer clothes, the first-class travel—swanning about in rich places with rich people. She'd taken it all, accepted it all. Oh, she'd said it was just so she could be the kind of woman he expected—perfectly groomed, perfectly gowned, an ornament for his arm, a beautiful woman to grace his side—because, after all, he was a wealthy man. Why should he put up with less?

The end of the affair... The words tolled in her brain like a funeral bell.

The doctor came, seeming to show not the slightest irritation at being summoned at such an hour. He was used to rich patients who demanded instant attention, even for trivial reasons.

Cesar left him to it. Rosalind watched him walk out of the bedroom, and felt his relief at being able to leave her at last. How he must be hating her, she thought—turning herself into an invalid just when he was denouncing her and she was on the point of bolting into the night.

The doctor spoke perfect English, and adopted that language straight away, despite Rosalind's opening greeting in Spanish. She ran through what had happened—the rich food, the wine—but glossed over the emotional storm that had probably triggered the bout of nausea.

The doctor nodded, and took it all in. And then, looking at her over the rim of his glasses, he said, 'And tell me, Señorita Foster, when was the date of your last period?'

Cesar stood on the terrace. He felt like a spring wound up so tight it must snap. His hands clenched over the iron balustrade, his shoulders hunched. He stared blindly out over the palm-tops to the sea beyond.

He wouldn't let himself think. Wouldn't let himself feel. Because it wasn't worth it. *She* wasn't worth it. A vicious tug pulled at his mouth. *Dios*, but she was good, though! That grand gesture of walking out on him—and then, just in time, that dramatic dash for the bathroom. The noises had been very convincing, but anyone could make themselves throw up if they wanted to.

It had been a clever move. Playing the sympathy card—*Be nice to me, I'm ill!*—and at the same time giving her an excuse to stay that wouldn't involve doing so on his terms.

His face hardened. Well, it would be on his terms from now on, that was for sure. She owed him and he was going to collect.

The night air brushed his cheek, lifting the hair on his forehead. Rosalind had used to do that sometimes, just run a finger across his forehead, feathering his hair...

Something clenched inside him. He forced it down. He didn't want to feel it. Only wanted to feel what he was feeling now. Anger. Contempt. Cold, hard feelings.

Safe feelings.

He went on staring into the night.

The doctor, when he emerged from the bedroom, coughed slightly. Cesar turned and walked back indoors.

‘Well?’ He might as well go through the motions. So might the doctor. He’d bill Cesar for his services, whether they’d been needed or not.

‘I have administered a mild sedative. She should have uninterrupted sleep tonight,’ the doctor said blandly, not spelling out what he meant by that. ‘I will check her again in the morning. Goodnight, *señor*.’

Cesar nodded, and escorted the doctor to the door. Then, on impulse, he headed for the fire stairs. He wanted fresh air—a lot of fresh air.

Taking out the dinghy in the dark was tricky, but once he was out on the sea the night wind filled the sail. The dotted lights of fishing boats interspersed the night as he silently skimmed the surface of the water.

Thoughts consumed him. He let them rage through his head, let the wind take them. He didn’t try to analyse them. What was the point? Rosalind Foster was as she was. Beautiful. Devious. Deceptive.

Dangerous.

Where had that word come from? Why?

How could Rosalind Foster be a danger to him?

She’d *been* dangerous—but she wasn’t any more. Now he was on to her game. He’d keep her for what he wanted from her. All he wanted from her.

Sex.

Liar!

The word seared in his mind. The rudder jerked in his hand, making the little craft jib. Steadily he reset the rudder, and the boat calmed again. He went on heading out to sea.

Dawn was breaking over the Mediterranean. Fishing vessels were making for harbour. The sky was rose-gold to the east.

Cesar felt cold. Very cold.

As he nosed the dinghy into the marina, and moored it, he thought of Rosalind, asleep in his bed. He waited for desire to kick in him, but it didn’t. Instead, an image swam into his mind, a memory of when he’d stood watching her sleeping the morning they’d gone to Menorca. He’d watched her for some time, taking in the tranquil beauty of her face in repose.

Something kicked in him. But it was not desire.

It was regret.

He strode up the pathway from the marina. What was the point of regret?

But he felt it, all the same.

As he walked into his apartment he paused. Something was different, but what? Then, as he went through into the bedroom, he realised what it was.

Rosalind had gone.

The coach journey back to England was long—endlessly long. But Rosalind spent the entire journey hunched into her seat, feeling numb.

Or sick.

The sickness was a real problem. She managed not to disgrace herself, keeping the bouts to service stops, but it was a struggle. Yet she was grateful for it, because it gave her something to focus on. Something other than what she was doing.

Leaving Spain.

It's been three years, she thought. Three years since I left England. As the coach made its way north-east across Europe the memories flooded back. How she had left England—flying first class, starting off in style, money no object! A sad smile crept across her face as she remembered.

Easier to remember those times, she realised, with a crushing pressure on her heart. Easier not to think of the times just past.

The vice crushed at her heart again, but she knew there was no point in regretting what she had done. Staying had been impossible. She had tried to win through to Cesar, and failed. She had not been able to convince him that her intent had not been malign—that she had wanted him for himself, not in order to use his wealth for her own ends. He hadn't believed her.

Nausea seeped into her mouth. She swallowed it down, breathing slowly and steadily, determined not to let it get the better of her. She stared sightlessly out of the window over the French countryside speeding by on the motorway.

And now she was beyond any hope of making him believe her.

Hardly aware of what she was doing, she slid her hand over her abdomen and went on staring out of the window.

At first, Cesar assumed Rosalind would return to El Paraíso. After all, she had left her entire wardrobe hanging in the closet. He had no idea where she'd gone, but he didn't much care. Who knew what friends and acquaintances she had out here in Spain? Her life was such a mystery that she could have holed up anywhere. She would, he presumed, lie low for a strategic amount of time, and then one fine evening she'd probably swan into the casino, dressed up to the nines, looking a knockout. Probably on the arm of another man.

She'd tried a lot of tricks with him. Maybe she reckoned it was time to try jealousy.

Would it work? He gave a private, cynical smile. Rosalind Foster might well find that she'd tried a gamble too far.

He was well shot of her. He might as well make the most of her grand gesture in doing a runner, and call her bluff on it.

The ache in his loins called his own bluff. He wasn't well shot of her at all! Oh, his hard sense might say that he was, but his body told him differently. His body told him, in the long reaches of the night, that it ached for Rosalind Foster.

And it ached not just for Rosalind pulsing with pleasure beneath him, but for her body curved against him, warm and soft, his arms wrapped around it, cradling her in sleep, sweet in his embrace. So very precious to him. So very dear.

His jaw tightened. No, he must put those thoughts away, those memories away. The Rosalind he imagined was not the real woman. He had built up fantasies about a fantasy. Rosalind Foster, the real Rosalind Foster, was nothing like the woman he wanted her to be. The woman who was going to be in his life—for ever.

And she never would be. He had found out in time. Found out what her real interest in him was. Whatever her protestations, nothing could take away the fact that, all through their affair, she'd hidden the truth. And when she swanned back into El Paraíso, to set her lures for him again, he would see her for what she was—not what he had wanted her to be.

But she did not return to El Paraíso.

She had forgotten the cold. The raw, damp cold that came up from the pavements and down from the clouds. She had forgotten the noise of London—the hiss of tyres in the rain, the rumbling of buses, the ceaseless churn of traffic.

Depression settled over her like a muffling cloud, and she welcomed it for it deadened all her feelings. The coach had arrived at some forsaken hour of the morning, and now she fought her way onto the Underground, heading north to the dreary suburb she had grown up in. As she emerged from the station everything looked grey, and colourless, and drear.

She stood there, clutching her suitcase, her back killing her after all those hours on the coach, her abdomen aching dully. She shivered in her thin jacket, hardly ever needed in Spain. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the heat, the warmth, the brightness and the light of Spain, but she was overpowered by the chill of England in the wet.

Someone bumped into her, and she murmured something in Spanish. The man looked at her oddly, and hurried on. Everyone seemed to be hurrying in the dull, grey street. She looked up and down the parade of shops on either side of the Tube station. Everything was exactly as she had left it.

She hefted up her suitcase and began to tramp along the pavement, heading north again.

It took Sandra two looks to believe her eyes.

‘*Ros?* I don’t believe it!’

Rosalind gave a weary smile. ‘Yup, it’s me. Can I—can I come in for five minutes?’

Sandra stepped back, opening the door wide. ‘Don’t be daft—come in and be done with it.’

As Rosalind stepped inside the other girl shot out a hand, halting her. ‘How—how are you?’

Her eyes were searching. Pitying.

‘OK,’ said Rosalind.

The other girl just nodded, and led her down to the kitchen.

‘Cuppa?’

Rosalind gave a wry smile. ‘I haven’t heard that word in nearly three years.’

‘Sit down,’ said Sandra. ‘Meet Harry.’

The baby sitting in the highchair waved his spoon at Rosalind and blew a raspberry. She couldn’t help but give a laugh.

‘Hello, Harry. I’ve heard a lot about you.’ She sat down at the kitchen table and leaned towards him. ‘Your mother informs me,’ she told the baby solemnly, ‘that you are a genius.’

Harry blew another raspberry, and banged the tray of his highchair with his spoon.

‘His mother,’ said Sandra, turning round from filling the kettle, ‘is totally right!’

‘I can see G for genius written all over him,’ promised Rosalind.

She sat paying attention to the baby while Sandra made tea, then sat down opposite her, pushing one mug towards Rosalind, keeping one for herself. Then she handed her son a toy, chunky coloured keys with a striped ball set in a socket for him to whiz around, and looked at Rosalind.

‘How come you’re back?’ she asked, straight off. Rosalind remembered that Sandra always went the direct route. ‘Your last letter—and it was a *long* time ago,’ she inserted admonishingly, ‘said you had no chance of getting clear for another year. So what happened? Did you get lucky? Hit the big time?’ Her eyes sharpened. ‘Meet Mr Right?’

Rosalind cupped her hands around the mug.

‘No,’ she said quietly. ‘Mr Wrong.’

She didn’t mean to cry. She really, really didn’t mean to. But tears started running down her face and splashing into her tea.

It was the gala opening of the O’Hanran golf club. A posse of top celebrity golfers had been flown in for the opening tee-off earlier that day, and now they and the other glittering guests were continuing the celebrations at the brand-new deluxe clubhouse. Champagne flowed like water, and the five-star restaurant had produced a buffet worthy of a nineteenth hole so exclusive that invitations had been fought over.

Pat O’Hanran, well into the celebrations, came up and slapped Cesar jovially on the back.

‘You can feel proud, m’boy. It’s off the ground in record time.’ He gave a crack of laughter. ‘No *mañana, mañana* when you’re on the job, eh?’

He slapped Cesar again, then took his elbow.

‘I’ve been sent to kidnap you. Kathleen’s orders. And you know I can’t get out of those!’

Cesar went with him, but reluctantly. He knew why Pat’s wife wanted him to come over. She’d have some female in tow, and would push her out in front of him. Then, when the girl failed to take, the Irishwoman would grill Cesar as to why, if he pleased, he appeared to be deaf, blind and dumb to anyone of the opposite sex. Cesar would simply tell her, politely but remotely, that work was keeping him too busy.

That, of course, was the whole point of the swathe of projects he had taken on. To keep busy. The O’Hanran golf resort was only one of the projects he’d gone for like a demon during these last months. The latest El Paraíso—two of them, on Menorca and in the Canaries—were well on the way to completion, and a third, in the Caribbean, was about to leave the drawing board. He was keen to get going on that one. It would keep him in the Caribbean for a season, and he could do with that.

Anywhere that wasn’t Spain.

Anywhere he hadn’t been with Rosalind.

His jaw tightened.

That she still had the power to influence his behaviour made him curse her. But then the woman had been a curse in his life—nothing else.

She had spoilt him for anyone else.

Oh, he had tried. Tried assiduously in that first, endless aftermath of her departure, as it had finally dawned on him that Rosalind Foster was not coming back to El Paraíso. That Rosalind Foster had walked out

of his life for good.

He had deliberately decided to take up with Ilsa Tronberg again, and the blonde had been visibly triumphant. But when it had come to it he hadn't been able to touch her.

Her body was wrong. It was too thin, the bones too long, the texture of her skin too different, her hair too fine, her nails too sharp.

And the face was wrong, too.

And Ilsa Tronberg altogether—wrong, wrong, wrong.

She had not been best pleased when he'd finished with her a second time before even starting. He didn't care.

He'd taken out a tennis player next, over-wintering in Spain between competitions. She was American, bright and breezy, and with an honest, whole-hearted appetite for sex that he'd thought must surely do the trick. But Mae Gallison's body had been wrong, too. Her muscle tone was too strong, her breasts too small, her hair too curly. And her face had been wrong, too. He'd given his regrets, and left.

Leah Wong was exquisite. An investment banker with a top Swiss bank, she'd been a guest at Hot El Paraíso, and Cesar had made her personally welcome over dinner. Her hair was like a raven's wing, her body like delicate porcelain.

But she was wrong, too.

He hadn't been able to touch her.

After giving up on Leah, he'd given up searching for a woman who wasn't wrong.

Now he was immune to all women. Even those handpicked by Kathleen O'Hanran, who'd told him to his face that celibacy for a man of his age wasn't natural.

The one she had in tow now was no exception. Oh, she was beautiful, all right, with peat-dark eyes and dark auburn hair—'The niece of my cousin's husband,' said Kathleen, working as a linguist, and as intelligent as she was eye-catching. Cesar smiled, and went through the motions, danced with the girl, then handed her back to Kathleen and Pat, and headed back towards the bar.

He got through a lot of whisky these days.

It helped to dull the pain.

The pain. He had faced up to it now, faced up to it in the long, lonely reaches of the night—the pain of having fallen in love with Rosalind Foster. Who had hidden all her debts from him. Taken him for a fool. Let him pay them for her and then walked out.

A memory, crude and ugly, of how he had treated her that last night jabbed at him.

Do you blame her for walking? You treated her like a whore!

He shot back in his own defence, vicious in his anger.

What else was she? Strip away everything else, and what else was she? What else could you call a woman who had an affair with you and all the time was lining you up to dig her out of debt?

The other voice jabbed at him again.

She said she didn't expect you to pay them! Said she'd kept quiet about them on purpose...

His mouth twisted.

Yes, kept quiet about them until you were so hooked on her you were putty in her hands. And as for all that prating that she never wanted you to bail her out—think how she promised she'd repay you! Well? Have you seen a single cent come your way since she took off? And do you really think you will?

No, Rosalind Foster had let him pay her debts, and then, realising her game was up, had spouted her noble lines about refusing to be his mistress, refusing to let him 'spoil' their relationship, and promptly done a runner. She'd be off somewhere at this very moment, with another rich guy in tow. Living the high life at another guy's expense. Another fool like him...

A peal of laughter hit him as he approached the bar. High-pitched and artificial, grating on his ears. As he approached, the female who had laughed put her hand on the knee of a man sitting on a high bar stool. Cesar could see the man, but not the female's face. He looked to be about seventy or so, and the woman with her hand on his knee was well under thirty, he guessed—or at least was dressed as if she were. Or should that be underdressed? he revised, taking in the tight, short skirt hoisted round her thighs.

The female laughed again, and as Cesar reached the bar he glanced at her.

She was looking at him, her eyes alight with pleasure.

'Well, *hi!*' she exclaimed. 'I thought I saw you here!'

Cesar's mouth tightened. Great. This was all he needed.

'Hello, Sable,' he said heavily. 'Did Portugal not have charms enough for you?'

She gave a trill of laughter and leant against the elderly man's leg.

'And how!' she breathed. 'You know—' her eyes gleamed at him '—you did me a really good turn, sending me there. I found poor Hiram, *wasting* away in the Algarve. So I livened things up for him!' She popped a kiss on the man's wrinkled face. He smiled benignly at her. 'Hiram just loves golf—don't you, sweetie?' She addressed her escort, who might have twanged something like 'Sure do,' but Sable was talking again.

'So,' she said brightly to Cesar, her eyes swiftly scanning the room beyond, then coming back to rest on his face, 'no Ros?'

Cesar's mouth tightened even more.

'We parted company some time ago,' he answered tersely. He caught the barman's eye and ordered.

'Oh!' said Sable hastily. 'Me, too—a Tequila Sunset, please!'

Cesar cast a glance at Hiram, who didn't seem to object to him buying her a drink.

'And for you, Mr—?' Cesar asked him, with more politeness than he felt he wanted to offer.

'Hackensacker,' pronounced the elderly man in a midwest accent. 'Hiram T. Hackensacker. Make mine a bourbon.'

Sable giggled. 'Isn't he a doll?' she said to Cesar.

'I can see the attraction,' he returned dryly.

Sable smirked again. 'He's got three married daughters,' she confided to Cesar. 'And they are just *so* mean to him. They won't let him have *any* fun! He is just *so* grateful to me for livening things up for him!'

Against his will Cesar felt his mouth quirked. There was an outrageousness about Sable that allayed his natural contempt for her lifestyle.

'Well, I wouldn't liven things up too much—he might not be able to handle it.'

She gave a giggle. ‘Oh, I know just when to stop—don’t worry! Trouble is—’ her long eyelashes batted blatantly ‘—total sweetie though Hiram is, I just never quite seem to use up my natural...energy...these days. I could really do with some...exercise. You know?’

Cesar shook his head. ‘No sale, Sable.’

She pouted, but not ill-humouredly. ‘Well, you can’t blame me for trying—now that you and Ros aren’t an item! I’d never poach, honest. But, like I told you, packages like you don’t stroll by every five minutes. No wonder I envied the knickers off Ros. So,’ she went on, not drawing breath, ‘how come you two split?’

He took a mouthful of whisky. Sable’s elderly protector seemed untroubled by her attentions to another man, and was contemplating his glass of bourbon. Or possibly the array of golfing regalia on the wall behind the bar.

‘Well,’ Cesar said contemplatively, ‘I owe it all to you, Sable, as it happens. That unforgettable evening in Puerto Banus.’

She looked puzzled. ‘When you zapped Yuri? How? What did I do? I was really glad for her! I’d never have mucked things up for her!’

He gave a thin smile. ‘Let’s just say you—what is that English expression?—tipped me the wink. Made me realise there was more to her than met the eye.’

She still looked blank. ‘I don’t get it.’

Cesar shrugged. ‘As it happened, Sable, I didn’t know about the money she owed.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Honestly—isn’t that bloody typical of Ros! I *told* her to get you on-side as soon as poss, so you could sort her out with Yuri! How dim can that girl get?’ She gave Cesar a narrowed look. ‘Don’t tell me you were too much of a tight-wad to sort it out for her? With all your dosh? Ros is *such* a looker you could at least have done that much for her! You were together *ages*.’

Why the hell was he having this conversation with this girl? Cesar thought disgustedly. Sable’s morals came from the gutter.

And yet—

And yet he couldn’t resist talking about Rosalind Foster. Couldn’t resist the opportunity to break open the scar and make the blood flow again in the wound. He would pay for it—pay for it with dreams that night he wouldn’t wish on his worst enemy. Dreams of wanting. Of losing.

He took another mouthful of whisky. Maybe it would help blot her out.

Sable was talking again. He forced himself to listen. He heard Rosalind’s name mentioned again. Stabbing at him.

‘—I mean, like, she’d had such a bloody time of it as well! She really deserved someone nice to get her out of it all. When I saw the two of you together I really thought she’d found it! And then you go and dump her after all she’d been through! That is really, really cheap of you, you know? I mean, don’t you think it’s really sad what she went through when she came out here?’

Cesar didn’t like the accusing note in her voice. His expression hardened.

‘Sable, maybe it feels like the end of the world for you when you get dumped by a rich guy, so you run mad with your credit cards, but—’

She put a hand on his chest, staying him in mid-sentence.

She looked at him with her overmade-up eyes.

‘You don’t know, do you?’ she said.

CHAPTER TEN

ROSALIND crouched down, cleaning cloth in hand, rubbing away at the lumpy vinyl on the floor of the kitchenette. It was old and cracked, and no matter how much she cleaned it it still looked dingy. But she had no business complaining, she knew. The council had moved really fast, considering the waiting lists, and this little studio flat was a haven for her. OK, it was small to the point of being cramped, but what was the point of having a larger place? It would just mean more work keeping it clean, heating it and so on. And with money so tight, and all her time occupied by the only thing that was keeping her going, the studio suited her fine.

Memory flashed in her mind of a fabulous deluxe apartment with a seaview to die for in Spain, of an ancient hilltop castle high above the Mediterranean, of one luxurious hotel room after another—but she put it aside. What was the point of remembering that brief interlude in her life?

What was the point of remembering Cesar Montarez?

Pain gripped her and she fought it, as she had done all these long, long months back in England, away from him.

However it had ended, however painful it had been, however doomed, she still missed him, missed him desperately, as if a part of her was missing.

She would never see him again, would have to live with the knowledge that everything had come to grief, turned to ashes.

And yet it made no difference, no difference at all. Cesar Montarez was wrapped around her heart, now and for ever. However much she missed him.

Why can't love die?

Why can't it just wither away, turn to dust?

But it wouldn't. That was the worst of it. Her love for Cesar was so deep within her, so much a part of her, that it was with her always.

Even though all she had of him was memories.

And something even more precious...

The doorbell sounded, jarring in her ears.

It was probably Jan from next door. She was in the same boat as Ros, but seemed to do nothing but grumble about it—moaning away because the council wouldn't give her a new cooker, or provide a replacement for the DVD player she'd broken, let alone move her to larger accommodation. She liked to come and moan at Ros, slumped on the sofa, drinking endless cups of tea and eating biscuits and saying she had to lose weight or she'd never get a bloke.

Yes, well, thought Ros tightly, as the doorbell went again. Jan's last bloke had been a waste of space—no reason to think she'd get any luckier.

And you've been so lucky with yours, haven't you? Falling for a man who thinks you only wanted him for his money! The inner taunt made her lips tighten.

The doorbell sounded yet again. Rosalind sighed. Jan wasn't going to give in. She straightened up, tossing the floorcloth into the sink, rubbed her aching back and headed to the front door. It was shielded from the main room of the studio by a projecting wall, to give her a little privacy from callers.

She opened the door on the chain.

'Jan—it's not the best time right now—' she began.

Her voice cut out. Through the narrow gap between the door and the jamb she could see it was not her neighbour who stood there.

There was a roaring in her head. She felt herself slump weakly against the wall.

'Rosalind!'

Cesar's accented voice came like an auditory hallucination. She had not heard it for over a year. The last time she had heard it it had been ushering in the doctor to his bedroom, that last, terrible evening.

'Rosalind!' The voice came again. She blinked. It was not a hallucination. Nor was the man standing there.

He looks taller, she thought absently. Thinner.

For a long moment she stared at him through the narrow gap. Then, instinctively, she started to close the door.

A hand shot out, bracing against the door as he put the weight of his body behind it. The door jerked back to the full length of the chain.

'I have to speak to you!'

For a moment she just went on staring blankly. She felt blank all the way through. Her head was still roaring, but more dimly now. Mechanically she moved to unfasten the chain, pushing back on the door to release the strain. At first he resisted, then, realising what she was doing, he dropped his hand.

She opened the door.

It was Cesar. Yes, taller than she remembered. And thinner. His face was thinner. She studied it, with that same dim roaring in her ears.

There was a starkness about his face that was unfamiliar, but that was all. The rest of him looked just the same.

Devastating. Expensive.

'May I come in?'

His voice was as accented as she remembered—or was it more so? He spoke in a controlled fashion, but she got the feeling he wasn't controlled. Not at all.

A nerve was ticking in his cheek.

'May I come in?' he said again.

She shook her head. Saying nothing. Incapable of speech. Knowing only that she mustn't, *mustn't* let him into the flat, let him back into her life.

Something moved in his eyes. As if he'd just suffered a pang of something. She didn't know what.

‘I need to speak to you,’ he said. His eyes were dark, so dark, looking down at her. She found herself thinking how long his lashes were. Far too long for a mere man.

The meaning of the words he had just said registered. They drew an echo from her.

‘Cesar—we have to talk.’

That had been her line—but Cesar hadn’t wanted to listen.

‘If it’s about the money,’ her voice answered, ‘you’re out of luck. I can’t afford to pay you back anything yet. But I haven’t forgotten I owe you. You’ll get your money back.’

Her words seemed to come from a long way away.

Cesar flinched. She wondered why.

She took a half-breath. ‘Look—it’s not exactly convenient right now. I’m pretty tied up—’

A sound came from the room behind her. A mewling sound.

She tensed. Cesar’s eyes were focused on her.

‘You have a cat?’

Her eyes flickered. ‘Yes. Look, like I said—it’s not convenient. So do you think you could—’

She didn’t finish her sentence. The mew turned into a cry.

Shock shafted down his face. Before she could stop him he had walked in, pushing past her. He stood in the entrance to the studio, stock still.

‘Por Dios—’ he breathed.

With a deep, abiding feeling of inevitability that dampened down the roaring in her head, Rosalind walked forward. She crossed the room to the bed, tucked into the corner, and went to the Moses basket beside it.

The crying came again.

‘It’s all right, sweetpea. Mummy’s here.’

She picked up the baby, swathed in a pink blanket, and cradled her. The wailing stopped.

Rosalind looked across at Cesar. Her eyes were as green as forest leaves. And quite expressionless.

‘She’s not yours. Don’t worry. I picked up another rich sucker on the way back here.’

He flinched, visibly.

‘Don’t say that.’ His voice grated.

She shrugged. ‘Why not? It could be true.’

Something was knotting itself inside her, holding something down, restraining it. She had to keep it pinned down, had to subdue it. Whatever it took. Whatever it made her say.

He seemed to have gone white around the mouth.

‘You weren’t going to tell me, were you?’

Rosalind looked at him. ‘No.’

She made the admission staring at him, green eyes stony, expressionless.

His face set. 'Why? Why not?'

Was there something else in his voice? She shut her ears to it. She wouldn't hear. She mustn't hear.

Instead she heard distant words drop from her mouth. 'Why not? You'd already paid out seven thousand euros on my behalf. That's quite a lot of child maintenance. And I'll be going back to work soon. There's a really good council-run crèche in this borough. I'm very fortunate. Don't worry—there's no father named on the birth certificate. No one's going to come chasing you for money.'

For a moment it seemed to her that he looked as though he'd been struck. Then, as her daughter realised that her rooting was not getting her anywhere fast, she let out a wail.

'She's hungry,' announced Rosalind. 'I'm going to have to feed her. Let yourself out if you're going.'

She was very calm about it all. Very calm about Cesar Montarez turning up on her doorstep after a year and discovering the daughter she had not been going to tell him about.

Very calm.

And it was important to stay calm. If she got upset she'd lose her milk, and then her baby would have to go on a bottle. And breast was best. All the parenting magazines said that, and so did her health visitor...

Her mind jumbled on, clinging to irrelevancies. Anything to stop herself being anything other than calm—very calm.

She sat down on the sofa, lifting her jumper and unfastening her feeding bra, then nestling the baby into position. As the infant latched on the crying stopped abruptly. Rosalind stroked her daughter's tiny head and murmured to her.

Her baby was her life now, her reason for living. Her only reason.

Then she looked up.

Cesar was still standing there, looking so tall and dark in her little studio that he seemed to overpower it totally. His dark expensive suit, and darker, even more expensive cashmere coat emphasised his physical dominance of the space.

She felt a bolt go through her, ripping away that paper-thin veneer of calmness she had clutched around her.

Cesar! Here! Now!

In the flesh...

And such flesh.

The bolt went through her again, and her eyes hung upon him, taking in every inch of his tall, lean body, drinking in his face, his features, his mouth and nose, his eyes...

His eyes...still splintered in shock.

Reality slammed back. Icing through her.

Well, she couldn't blame him for being in shock. It was a shock to find yourself a parent—she should know. She could still remember, as vividly as if he'd just said it, the Spanish doctor telling her, after he'd examined her internally, that he was pretty confident she was pregnant, and that that, not the lobster, had been the primary cause of her sudden nausea.

She hadn't believed him. Wouldn't believe him. Even when she'd done the mental sums in her mind and realised that, yes, she was overdue with her period.

'If you wish, I will return in the morning with a testing kit, Señorita Foster,' the doctor had told her. 'Be assured, I will be very discreet.'

But his discretion had been unnecessary—so had his pregnancy test.

She had packed and gone. It hadn't taken her pregnancy to make her go, but that had confirmed the need. Pregnancy had been the final nail in the coffin of her affair with Cesar. It would simply have confirmed even more that she was with him for what she could get out of him. Whether that was repayment of her debts—or life maintenance for his child.

Well, she hadn't been able to stop him repaying her debts, but at least she could stop him picking up the tab for his daughter.

That was what she had to hold on to now—that, and nothing else. Nothing else at all.

'There's no need to hang around,' she told him, in that same controlled, indifferent voice. So very calm. 'I'm not going to make any claims on you. And, like I said, when I'm earning again I can start putting money aside to repay you the money I owe you. It will take a while, but you'll get it all back. And if you don't—' she smiled thinly '—you know where to find me.'

A shadow passed across his face.

'I had to hire detectives to find you,' he said in a low, intense voice.

She made a face. 'I didn't know you wanted your money back that badly.'

His jaw clenched. The nerve in his cheek was working again.

'Do you know how I found you? The public registrar. Births, marriages—and deaths.'

His eyes rested on her. There was an emotion in them she could not read.

Refused to read.

'Deaths,' he echoed, his voice hollow.

His face contorted. 'Why? *Why* didn't you tell me? *Why*?'

The words had broken from him. Vehement. Demanding.

She smoothed her daughter's head again, feeling the tiny body warm in her arms as she nursed.

'How could I?' she answered. Her voice was still remote, impersonal. 'You'd already said I'd be bound to trot out some kind of heartbreaking sob-story—'

With a sudden jerking movement Cesar's arm shot out sideways, his hand fisting. It impacted on the wall with a sickening crunch. His face was jagged with self-accusation.

'Por Dios!'

The tiny mouth had stopped sucking. She didn't like the noise of her father hitting the wall with his fist. Rosalind soothed her cheek and relatched her on. She didn't look back up at Cesar.

'I thought you had simply got a taste for luxury and couldn't give it up,' he said, his voice still low. 'I thought you'd come out to Spain with a rich lover and he'd finished with you, but you'd got hooked on expensive living. I thought that was how you'd got into debt. I—didn't—know.'

His voice was bitter.

‘Tell me...’ His voice faltered, then went on. ‘Tell me how it was. Tell me what the truth is, so that I understand...’

For a while she did not speak, only gazed down at her daughter. So tiny, so helpless. So unexpected and so very, very dear.

Then slowly, haltingly, she spoke as she cradled her daughter. Illegitimate, just as she had been.

The tale came quietly, dispassionately.

She had never been in the presence of her father. He’d refused to see her mother, even when she’d gone, begging, to his office. She’d been turned away, told to prove paternity in a court of law. When Rosalind was growing up she’d used to have fantasies of tracking him down, attacking him physically for what he had done to her mother. Her wretched, heartbroken mother, who had fallen in love with a total bastard and hadn’t been able to bear the heartbreak of taking him to court to prove paternity—prove to the world what a total bastard he was.

But tracking down her father—attacking him, denouncing him, doing everything in her power to ruin his life as he had ruined her mother’s—would only have upset her mother. So she had never done it. Instead she had become her mother’s rock, her salvation. Her reason for living.

Her mother had depended on her totally. She had been the centre of her mother’s existence. And the bond had been exceptionally close. With half her mind Rosalind had known so much closeness was stifling, that as a child, an adolescent, a young adult, she had carried too much of an emotional responsibility, to the point where it was a burden. But she had never seen it like that. It had simply been Mum and her—all the time.

And she had wanted so *desperately* to wave a magic wand over her! She had longed for a knight in shining armour to come riding up on his charger, fall in love with her mother and whisk her to paradise. But no white knight had ever come to the little terraced house in the dull north London suburb. It had just been Mum and her, living together, with her working locally as a secretary, her mother in a shop.

She had known all along that when she grew up, left school, went to local college, she could never leave her mother. It would have devastated her, taken away from her the one reason for her existence. And she’d been happy enough, knowing she was keeping her mother happy.

Until Barry had come along. She’d been out on dates often enough. Her striking looks had ensured her a ready supply of boys wanting to be seen out with her. But she hadn’t taken any of them seriously until Barry. Barry had worked at the posh car showroom in the more upmarket suburb next door. He’d been older than her, more sophisticated. And very keen to get her into bed.

When she was twenty-one he’d succeeded. He hadn’t been too pleased to find she was a virgin, and had told her they were pretty boring in bed. Even so, he’d stuck with her, and when he’d been offered a job managing an outlet of the showroom company in the Midlands had invited her to go with him. He’d even thrown in an offer of marriage, because he could tell she was the type to want that sort of thing. He’d been glad to have the chance to move to the Midlands—it would get her away from her mother, who was the clinging type and didn’t like him.

And then, before she’d been able to give him an answer on his proposal, her mother had collapsed. The diagnosis had devastated her, drowning her in guilt because she’d been so busy having her affair with Barry that she hadn’t realised her mother wasn’t well. If she hadn’t been so tied up with him she’d have known that her mother was trying to hide the fact that she was ill, and made her go to the doctor earlier.

As it was, the cancer had been well advanced.

Forty-five. That was all her mother had been. Forty-five. And all she’d had in life was her daughter.

The chemo and radiotherapy had been grim. Weeks and months of it. Her mother becoming thin and then skeletal, her hair falling out. But it had bought time. Precious time.

And when the doctor had taken Rosalind aside and told her that her mother had perhaps nine months, a year, no more, she had decided. Irrevocably, wholeheartedly.

The house had only been rented, and Rosalind had chucked her job as a secretary at the local solicitor's and made her plans. Her friend Sandra, just about to be married, had been her co-conspirator. Together they had sold every stick of furniture in the house and raised a lump sum. Then Rosalind had raided her savings and added them to the pot. And flexed her credit cards.

When her mother had come out of hospital she had been ready. So had the first-class air tickets to Spain, and the booking at a posh hotel in Marbella.

Her mother was going to have the time of her life—for the rest of her life.

And to hell with what it would cost.

For those last precious months she would live the high life.

As for Barry—well, a man who had told her with incredulous anger that she was off her rocker to blow so much cash on a dying woman was of no interest to her.

And she had blown it all—all the money she had scraped together and more. Running up debts on her credit cards with a ruthlessness that she hadn't wasted an hour, a second, regretting. She had lived the high life with her mother—shopping for them both in expensive boutiques, staying in the best hotels, eating in lovely restaurants, taking her mother to all the places in Spain she'd always wanted to see.

A wonderful swansong. A final time of being together.

While the cancer steadily ate up her mother's life.

The Alhambra had been the last place they visited. The last place where she had precious memories of her mother before the final end had come.

She had died in her daughter's arms, in the convent hospice that had taken her in for the terminal weeks of the illness.

Rosalind looked down now, at *her* daughter, so tiny, so beloved.

When she had been born she had known that her baby daughter would be her reason for her living. It would be hard financially, but she did not care. She would love her more than anything, anyone. It wouldn't matter that her daughter had no father—she hadn't had one either.

Her only regret was that her own mother had never known, was no longer there to love her grandchild.

'I've called her Michelle. After Mum.'

There was a tightness in her voice as she came to the end of her tale. She didn't want it to be there. But it was.

Carefully, very carefully, Cesar spoke. 'When I checked the registry of deaths and found your mother's record I went to visit the hospice where she died. The nuns remembered your mother well. Remembered you. Remembered your devotion. Your grief. I—I paid for a requiem mass for her. I—I hope you do not mind. It seemed...something...I could do for you, who put your life in hock for the sake of a dying woman.'

The tightness in her throat thickened. Like a garrotting band.

There was a footfall. A shadow over her. Over her nursing child.

‘May—may I see her?’

Cesar crouched down. She saw his trouser material strain over the muscles of his thighs, saw the expensive cashmere coat pool on the shabby carpet. A hand, large, and tanned, reached out, and fingers tentatively touched the tiny head covered with fine, dark, silky hair. The hand seemed to be shaking slightly.

Something about seeing that large, strong hand touching that tiny, delicate head pulled at her. Inside, the hard, tight knot that had been winding around her, tighter, and tighter, pinning her down, gagging and binding her, began to loosen. She fought to pull the knots tighter again, like a tourniquet, cutting off all feeling. But as she looked down at Cesar’s hand, cupping his unknown daughter’s head, she could feel the bands unravelling. She tried to stop them, tried so hard...

His daughter did not interrupt her feeding for this moment in her life when her father first touched her. She went on sucking, strongly and rhythmically, her whole being focused on imbibing her mother’s milk.

Cesar stared down at her, his heart crushing.

My daughter—

Emotion knifed through him. Pain, agony and joy—fierce, shining joy—all at the same time.

Something splashed on his hand. He looked up.

‘Oh, *God.*’ His face buckled. ‘*Rosalind—*’

He bent his forehead to hers. Blindly she reached and clutched at his hair, her fingers pressing into the nape of his neck.

A high, cracking sound came from her throat.

His arms came around her, folding her to him as he hauled himself up beside her, cradling her head against his shoulder.

‘Don’t cry. Dear God, don’t cry. Don’t cry.’

But she couldn’t stop. A year’s worth of tears were breaking from her. Pouring from her. Unstoppable. A torrent of tears, washing out so much, so much. Hardness and pain and hurt and loss. He held her, and stroked her hair, and murmured to her, sweet and Spanish, making her clutch at him again as the tears poured from her.

Until all her tears had gone, washing out every pain, every hurt.

‘*Querida,*’ said Cesar. ‘Our daughter has stopped feeding.’

Rosalind lifted her face from the sodden patch of cashmere on his shoulder and twisted her head down. Michelle was staring up at her accusingly.

Then, with a shifting glance of blue eyes, the infant gaze moved to behold the other face looking down at her. She stared, unblinking. A tiny starfish hand moved.

Cesar placed one finger in her palm and the tiny fingers closed over it. A look of wonder passed across his face.

‘*Hola, chiquita,*’ he said to her. His voice was cracked.

Michelle considered her father. Then, with a jerking movement, she tugged his finger to her mouth and began to suck at it. A second later she rejected it in disgust, and opened her mouth to wail.

A laugh broke from Rosalind. Choking, but a laugh. A last tear splashed, and was gone. She sniffed noisily.

‘I must give her my other breast,’ she said. ‘You have to keep the feeds even, or you get lopsided.’ Her voice was tremulous as she imparted her new expertise in baby care.

A crooked smile parted Cesar’s mouth as he shifted to let Rosalind free her other breast, taut and swollen with milk, and turn Michelle around to feed again. The wailing cut off as the baby’s mouth closed over the nipple and the little starfish hand rested on the smooth, veined breast.

‘Happy again,’ said Rosalind.

The phrase echoed in her mind. She had said it at random, and yet suddenly it was there, between them.

Ringin true and sweet.

She lifted her eyes and looked at Cesar. She said nothing. She could not think, only feel. Feel, washing in wave after wave over her, an emotion so strong she could not resist it.

For a long moment he just looked, drowning in the green, green eyes that had haunted his dreams for the long year past.

But now she was real again, not a dream any more. Not a memory of loss, of pain, of hurt. And now that she was real again, now that he had found her again, he knew he must say what had to be said. To draw the poison between them, to heal the wound he had inflicted on her.

‘Will you forgive me?’ he said in a low voice. ‘I was such a bastard to drive you away from me. But—’ He took a deep, heavy breath. ‘But when I found out about your debts something just snapped inside me! I felt gutted—as though everything we’d had together had been a lie all along. As though you’d just been playing me—taking me for a sucker, biding your time, waiting to sting me to repay the money for you like a total sap.’

He paused. ‘It made me doubt everything about you. Remember everything about you. How you were such a mystery—you had no past, you would never talk about who you were or where you came from. So when I discovered about your debts, owing so much to that scum Rostrov, I thought the worst of you.’

‘I didn’t want it to touch us. Contaminate us. That’s why I kept quiet about it. I tried to tell you that, but you wouldn’t believe me.’

There was pain in her voice. It slashed at him like a knife.

‘I wanted so much to be perfect for you,’ she said sadly. ‘I knew you didn’t keep women long—that you’d be on to someone new soon enough, because hadn’t you picked me up so quickly?—but I wanted to do the very best I could to make you want to keep me as long as possible.’

A bitter twist tugged at his mouth.

‘I even became suspicious of that! Why you were so undemanding of me, so devoted, so...so perfect...’

‘Until you discovered I wasn’t perfect at all. And I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t bear you being so angry with me. I couldn’t bear...’ She swallowed. ‘I couldn’t bear the way you were that last day. I couldn’t bear it.’ She paused, swallowing again. ‘So I left you.’

The nerve ticked in his cheek again.

‘I couldn’t believe you’d gone,’ he said. His eyes had a bleakness in them. ‘I kept waiting for you to come back. I knew you would. I was certain of it—I was that arrogant. But you didn’t. And day by day, week by week, month by month, I had to accept that you were not coming back to me. That I had driven you away.’

He paused. ‘I tried to tell myself it was for the best—but I was lying. I missed you. Missed you in the day, and in the night. No other woman filled the space that you had filled.’

‘You had other women?’ Her voice was sharper than she’d meant, as sharp as the knife stabbing into her heart at his admission.

‘I tried,’ he said. ‘But I couldn’t. They weren’t you. Each one was beautiful, each one was...not you.’

He stared sightlessly into the past he had just walked out of.

‘Everything in the world was...not you.’

He was silent a moment, his face stark. And then, in a strained voice, he said, ‘When—when did you know you were pregnant?’

She pressed her lips together, looking down at his daughter nursing at her breast.

‘I never even suspected,’ she admitted. ‘It was that doctor who spotted it. He thought there might be another reason why I was so nauseous—and he was right. Just the possibility of it meant I knew I had to go—you’d have hated me even more, thinking I’d done it on purpose to get some kind of financial commitment from you. So I knew I could never tell you.’

A harsh sound came from him.

‘*Dios*—if I hadn’t tracked you down...’ He sounded anguished, and Rosalind’s heart squeezed. ‘I would have lost my child as well as you...’

There was something in his voice that stabbed her.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I’m so sorry, Cesar.’

She felt the tears begin to come again, and his arm tightened around her. She felt his warmth, his strength, protecting and sheltering her. He cupped her cheek and she leant into his strong, safe hand.

‘No, you have nothing to apologise about. Nothing! I drove you away with my vileness to you that last day! No more tears. Not now, not ever. You have shed your tears, *querida*, for your mother, and for me, and I will not let you shed one more. Not one more.’

He leant and kissed her. Very gently, very softly.

‘I love you,’ he told her. ‘I loved you then, and was too blind to know it.’

She searched his eyes. ‘I ask for nothing. Truly.’

‘You have everything that I can give you,’ he told her. ‘Everything that my heart possesses. My life, my love, my soul.’

And he kissed her again.

‘You realise,’ Cesar said later, as he stood gazing down at Michelle, asleep in her Moses basket, while Rosalind made coffee, ‘that I owe a debt of eternal gratitude to Sable.’

She stopped in the act of pouring water over the instant granules.

‘Sable?’

He cast a last look at his sleeping daughter and walked towards the kitchenette. He still looked too tall for the flat, thought Rosalind, even now he had discarded his overpowering cashmere overcoat.

‘She told me about your mother,’ he said.

‘*Sable* did?’

He gave a grating laugh.

‘She laid into me and gave me an earful. I...I didn’t believe her at first. I thought it might indeed be nothing more than a sob-story that you and she had concocted together. I was half expecting her to add that the only reason she turned over more men than hot dinners was because she was keeping her aged grandparents in their ancestral home! But she got angry when I expressed my scepticism, and swore blind by you. Told me to get on my bike and check it out!’

A pang went through Rosalind. Sable had turned up trumps after all. A wave of gratitude washed through her.

A thought struck her. ‘When did you see her again? I thought you’d sent her off to Portugal.’

‘She came back—with her prize,’ he explained dryly.

Rosalind frowned.

‘Not Rostrov again?’

He shook his head. ‘No, she’s improved the company she keeps, I’m glad to say! Her prize—’ his voice became even more dry ‘—is an extremely well-heeled American senior citizen by name of Hiram T. Hackensacker. Apparently, according to Sable—who had dragged him along to the opening of the O’Hanran golf club, where I encountered her—he has three daughters, all of whom are bent on depriving him of, er, fun, in his closing years. Her mission—’ his mouth twitched ‘—is to thwart their miserable plans...’

They exchanged glances, laughter brimming.

‘Good old Sable,’ said Rosalind.

‘Yes, indeed. We must invite her to our wedding.’

Rosalind stilled.

‘Wedding?’

He came towards her. Took the coffee mug out of her hand. Replaced it on the kitchen surface. Slid his hands on either side of her head and stood looking down at her, cradling her face.

‘Please marry me. Please come back to Spain with me. Please make a family with me. Please—please love me, Rosalind Foster.’

Love shone from her eyes as she answered.

‘I already do,’ she whispered. ‘I already did.’ She reached to kiss him. ‘And I always will.’

His arms slid down her shoulders, around her waist, and he held her to him, heart to heart, soul to soul.

The setting sun bathed the *castillo* in golden-rose light. Cesar and Rosalind stood in the entrance courtyard, watching the procession of wedding cars wind down the narrow hairpin bends towards the coast. Last of all was a huge white stretch limo that could hardly negotiate the road.

‘Do you think his daughters will speak to him again?’ murmured Rosalind wonderingly.

‘No chance,’ Cesar answered. ‘They’ll be hightailing it to their lawyers to try and get him declared of unsound mind and then they’ll probably hire a hitman to take out Sable!’

‘Mrs Hiram T. Hackensacker.’ Rosalind rolled Sable’s new name around her tongue.

Her new husband put his arm around her.

‘To think she beat you to a bridegroom, *querida*.’ There was amusement in his voice. Sable Hackensacker had been an unforgettable guest at their wedding party that day, wearing a spectacularly short dress and a shopfull of diamonds, lavishly doting on her ancient husband while shamelessly running her eyes over every male guest. She’d been exuberantly enthusiastic about both her and Rosalind’s happy endings—even if she had sighed to her with extravagant envy over Cesar’s youth and virility compared with her own bridegroom’s.

‘I noticed the chauffeur was rather good-looking,’ Rosalind observed.

‘Let’s hope he has enough energy to...er...exercise Sable the way she likes,’ he replied.

Rosalind leant her head on his shoulder.

‘I’m glad for her,’ she said simply. ‘I’m glad for the whole world today.’

Cesar tightened his embrace.

‘I’m more selfish. I’m only glad for us.’

‘Us, too,’ allowed his bride.

He bent and kissed her lightly.

He looked at her questioningly. ‘Are you sure that you want to go to Granada for our honeymoon?’

She nodded, having no doubts. ‘Yes. I want to take Michelle to the last place I went when I was happy with Mum. I want to walk around the gardens of the Alhambra and make my peace with the past. Mum had such a sad life—and what chills me to the core...’ she took a shuddering breath ‘...is that I was all set to repeat it with my daughter...’

She took Cesar’s hand and held it to her cheek.

‘You came for me, as my father never came for my mother. I will have the life my mother never had because of that, and our daughter will have the family I never did. And all because of you, my own dear love.’

She reached to kiss him in the warmth of the Spanish sun, happiness and gratitude welling through her like a rich, celestial blessing.

He kissed her back, gently at first. And then, as his mouth tasted hers, less gently. As she pressed her body to his she felt desire, deep and passionate, release within her.

His arms slid around her, holding her to him as he lifted his mouth from hers.

‘Tell me, my most adored bride, when will our daughter want feeding again?’ Cesar enquired, in a deceptively offhand fashion.

‘Oh, I think we’ve got about an hour,’ Rosalind informed him.

He slipped his arms from her shoulders and took her hand instead, leading her indoors.

‘Let’s see what we can do in an hour, then,’ he said. He bent his head, brushing his lips over hers once more. She sighed, and moved against him.

Happiness bathed her. She had everything—everything her heart could desire. Her husband, her daughter—and the whole world was theirs.

Cesar’s kiss deepened.

‘Let’s see,’ he said, ‘what we can do in a lifetime.’

A Latin Passion

By Kathryn Ross



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CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT was that old proverb...? Something about keeping your friends close but your enemies even closer... Penny mused as she walked into the head offices of Lucas Shipping. Well, this was her first step into the rival camp and it felt strangely liberating. At least she was doing something constructive, not just sitting waiting for the axe to fall, as her father seemed intent on doing.

A blast of cold air washed over her skin as she went from the tropical Caribbean heat into the air-conditioned foyer, and a shiver ran through her...but whether it was from the cold or the thought of what her father would say if he knew she was here, she didn't know. A few weeks ago, when she had phoned him and voiced the idea of approaching Lucas personally, appealing for more time to pay what was owed, her father had gone almost apoplectic with rage. 'Lucas is the devil incarnate,' he had bellowed.

'But, Dad, you don't really know that,' Penny had insisted softly. 'It was Lucas's father that you had trouble with, and he's dead now. Maybe his son will be better.'

'You can be very naïve sometimes, Penny,' her father had grated angrily. 'Lucas Darien is just like his father, and I'll tell you this: I'd rather go under than ask a member of that family for any favours.'

Penny could just have left things. After all, it was really nothing to do with her; this was her father's business. She had her own career to think about, and as manageress of a beauty spa on board one of the world's biggest luxury cruise liners she was too far away to do anything anyway. However, a few phone calls later she had heard her father's anger turn to depression and she had known that she cared too much about him not to try to step into the breach. If she'd had enough money she would have tried to bail him out herself, but the next best thing had been to ask for leave from work and fly out to Lucas Darien's head office in Puerto Rico. Maybe her father was too proud to ask for help, but Penny wasn't.

Okay, maybe the estate had to go...maybe it was time her father retired. The sugar industry had been going through a bad patch, and he had been struggling for a long time to make the estate pay, but surely he didn't have to lose their family home as well as all their land? That house had been handed down through three generations of their family...it was far too precious to let go without a fight...even if that did mean humbling herself before the enemy.

'Can I help you?' The receptionist looked up enquiringly as she approached. She was a young woman in her early twenties, with ash-blond hair and a slightly harassed expression in her blue eyes.

'I'm here to see Lucas Darien,' Penny said with brisk confidence, as if she had every right to see the man straight away, sidestepping the little fact that she had no appointment and knew that the man's time was like gold dust.

'Oh, you must be Mildred Bancroft, Mr Darien's new PA.' The woman's whole demeanour suddenly seemed to lighten, and she smiled at Penny warmly. 'Gosh, am I glad to see you...' Before Penny could say anything the phone next to them rang and the woman turned away to pick it up. 'Excuse me a moment...'

Penny was left in a quandary. If she owned up straight away to the fact that she wasn't Mildred, the new PA, she probably wouldn't get past the reception and wouldn't see Lucas Darien today. She had already phoned twice, trying to make an appointment, and had been told she'd have to wait until the end of the month. Her father didn't have that much time to spare. He had already been warned that an eviction order for the twenty-fifth of this month was likely.

‘Oh, hi.’ The receptionist giggled at whatever was being said to her at the other end of the line. ‘No, things are getting better around here now; the cavalry has finally arrived in the shape of the new PA, so that should take some of the pressure off me...thank God. Yes, I can make dinner tonight—’

‘Shauna.’ A deep voice boomed from the inner office...a voice that was unquestionably disgruntled. ‘Will you please get me the files I asked for half an hour ago?’

‘Got to go, Paul.’ Shauna hurriedly put the phone down and grimaced at Penny. ‘That’s the boss,’ she hissed. ‘But don’t worry, his bark is worse than his bite...he’s quite nice, really.’

‘I’d like them today, Shauna, if that wouldn’t be too much trouble,’ the voice continued in an even fiercer tone.

‘Coming, Mr Darien.’ Shauna flushed bright pink. ‘He’s not in a very good mood recently,’ she whispered to Penny as she searched through a pile of papers that were sitting next to her in an untidy heap. ‘His girlfriend broke up with him a few weeks ago, then his PA left to get married, and he’s been snowed under with work...what with trying to organise things here and sort through his late father’s business affairs. I’m having to do more and more...’

‘Really?’ Penny murmured. It was good to know that the enemy was having his fair share of problems, and she couldn’t help hoping the guy was absolutely miserable. He deserved it after the way he and his family had treated her father. She watched as Shauna started to rummage through the papers with increasingly nervous fingers.

‘Where the heck did I put those files?’ she wailed under her breath. ‘I had them a moment ago. You can’t see them, can you? They’re in a green folder.’

Penny couldn’t help liking this girl, with her dizzy manner and careless chatter. ‘Is that them over there?’ She pointed to a shelf behind, where two green folders sat next to a cup and saucer on a silver tray.

‘Thank heavens for that!’ Shauna exclaimed. ‘Whoops...I forgot his coffee and it’s cold now...another bad mark for me...’

‘Well, you can’t do everything,’ Penny said sympathetically.

‘No...’ The woman smiled at her gratefully. ‘I’m so glad you are here.’

The words were said in such a heartfelt fashion that Penny started to feel a bit guilty that she was not Mildred, the perfect new PA.

‘Shauna, what is taking you so long?’ Lucas Darien appeared in the doorway, one expensively shod foot tapping impatiently.

Penny’s gaze went from that black shiny shoe up over the dark business suit. He was very tall and lean, and yet he had a powerful breadth to his shoulders. Her gaze locked with the dark intensity of his eyes and a frisson of shock surged through her. Lucas Darien was not at all what she had been expecting. The man was absolutely gorgeous. He was probably about thirty-six, he had melting dark eyes and a ruggedly handsome face; his jaw was firm and square, giving the impression of strength and determination, yet his lips had a sensual curve. She wondered what it would be like to be kissed by those lips...

The thought sent further shock waves through her and she mentally pulled herself up. Okay, he was attractive...so attractive that he probably wouldn’t be out of place playing some macho romantic lead in a movie. But she couldn’t let herself forget exactly why she was here. This was Lucas Darien, her father’s enemy, not some heart-throb off a movie set.

‘This is Mildred Bancroft, Mr Darien,’ Shauna said quickly. ‘Your new PA.’

‘Really?’ Surprise registered in his dark eyes. ‘You’re not what I was expecting.’ His gaze swept over her in an almost brutally assessing way that made heat run rampantly through her. How dared he look at her

like that? And what did he mean by that statement?

‘You are not what I was expecting either,’ she murmured, tipping her chin up defiantly.

‘What were you expecting?’ he asked immediately.

The question took her by surprise, as did the sudden softening of his tone, the smile that played around the dark eyes.

‘Well...’ She shrugged. In truth she had been expecting him to look more like his father. She had met Lucas’s father twice. He had been tall and handsome, but that was where the similarity ended. Lawrence Darien had possessed cool English looks: pale blond hair, pale blue eyes and an aristocratic nose down which he had seemed to peer rather contemptuously. No, Lucas was nothing like his cold, autocratic father... obviously he took after his Spanish mother. Maybe there was some hope that he would be more compassionate than his father...

‘Well?’ Lucas prompted her, and she realised he was still waiting for an answer.

‘You’re younger than I expected,’ Penny improvised hastily. If she told him who she was before she got into his office, she ran the risk of being shown the door before she could have her say.

‘Strange, I was going to say exactly the same thing to you.’ Lucas smiled. ‘From the CV that the agency sent me, I expected you to be at least fifty.’

Penny felt herself blushing wildly. Obviously he knew she wasn’t Mildred Bancroft. ‘Eh...well...I can explain...’

‘Shauna, bring us through a coffee when you have a minute.’ Lucas cut across her to instruct his receptionist, who seemed mesmerised by their exchange.

‘Come through into my office.’ He stood back and waved Penny through to the inner sanctum.

This was very promising, Penny thought with a smile. He knew she wasn’t his PA, but he was still going to give her some of his time.

‘Thank you.’ She gave him the benefit of her sweetest smile as she passed him in the doorway. He didn’t respond, which was somewhat unusual.

Penny was an attractive woman, twenty-eight, with long golden blonde hair, wide green eyes, and a petite figure that curved in all the right places. She was used to men smiling back at her. Persuading this man to treat her father leniently was not going to be easy, she acknowledged grimly.

The office was dark after the brightness of the outer reception. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. The walls were lined with bookshelves. The central desk was awash with files, and behind that were filing cabinets, their drawers wide open as if someone had been searching for something. Another desk in the far corner was covered in boxes that were filled with books and files. It looked as if Lucas Darien had recently disturbed a robbery in progress...either that or he was desperately in need of clerical help.

He motioned her towards the leather chair opposite his and watched as she sat. It wasn’t lost on her that there was a brief flicker of interest in his dark eyes as she crossed long shapely legs. At least he wasn’t completely immune to her. She had selected her pale green dress very carefully this morning, with the knowledge that it emphasised her curvy figure and had a small split at the front that was teasingly provocative. Penny had figured that if she was going to throw herself on the mercy of her father’s enemy she needed all the help she could get.

‘Obviously your CV isn’t entirely accurate...Ms Bancroft.’ He sat down behind the desk and leaned back in his chair to survey her through slightly narrowed eyes.

The statement took Penny by surprise; she had thought he had already figured out that she wasn’t Mildred Bancroft. Before she could formulate her reply he was proceeding briskly.

‘Let’s see...there was ten years at Danovate...five years as PA to Sir Gordon Marsden...then your last job, three years as PA to Lieutenant Colonel Montgomery Cliff in Barbados?’ One dark eyebrow rose. ‘Unless you started work at the age of ten, I’d say something doesn’t add up, Ms Bancroft.’

The sarcasm in his tone grated on her sensitive nerves. ‘Or may I call you Mildred?’ He leaned forwards suddenly, as if intently interested in hearing her answer.

There was something about his manner, or maybe it was the way his eyes seemed to linger on the softness of her lips, that made her nerves drop into freefall. ‘Eh...well, you see, the thing is...You can call me Mildred if you like, but really...my name...’ She was starting to sound as if she suffered from a bad speech impediment. Pull yourself together, Pen, she told herself crossly. Tell him who you are and how worried you are about your father. Damn it, cry if you have to...

‘Good.’ He didn’t give her the chance to finish her sentence, just sat back with a satisfied smile. ‘Mildred it is, then.’ He drummed his fingers on the walnut desk. To Penny’s overwrought nerves the noise sounded like a drum roll prior to an execution. She really needed to tell Lucas the truth now. Prolonging this misapprehension was just getting in the way of her reason for being here.

‘You see, the thing is, Mildred, as long as you are up to the job here I’m prepared to overlook a slight exaggeration with your qualifications.’ The drum roll seemed to be getting louder. ‘As you can probably tell, I’m desperately short of staff here. So we’ll give it a two-week trial, shall we?’

‘Actually, Lucas, we are at cross purposes here,’ Penny plunged in. ‘I feel I must tell you—’

‘Really, Mildred, I don’t want or need to know your explanation about the CV. You obviously impressed the agency, because they have said you are worth waiting for, and they have a terrific reputation, so that is good enough for me. If you could just start as soon as possible that would be great.’

Shauna shouldered her way in with a tray of coffee. ‘We really need an extra pair of hands around here, don’t we, Shauna?’ Lucas said jovially.

‘Oh, yes.’ Shauna nodded and smiled at Penny. ‘Helen...that’s Mr Darien’s last PA...well, she left without giving proper notice. And things have been crazy around here.’ She nodded towards the desk behind her. ‘All those boxes need sorting out and I can’t do everything—’

‘Yes, okay, Shauna.’ Lucas hastily cleared a space on his desk and then reached to take the tray from her. ‘Better get back to your desk now, and hold my calls for a while until I’m finished talking to Mildred.’

As the door closed behind the woman Lucas smiled wryly. ‘Poor Shauna has been struggling to cope.’

‘Yes, so I noticed.’

‘This office is always busy; we deal with major businesses in the West Indies, and ship imports and exports from different islands. On top of that we now have my father’s business to sort out, as he died six months ago and his affairs were not quite in order.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Penny murmured, for some reason feeling obliged to offer her condolences.

‘My father was a property developer,’ Lucas swept on, as if she hadn’t spoken. ‘And he had a large portfolio of investment properties which have all been passed down to me.’

‘Lucky you.’ Penny tried to keep the edge out of her voice. His father had been a charlatan.

‘Mmm...but it’s not as straightforward as it sounds. I’ve recently had to dispense with the services of my late father’s solicitor—due to the fact that he was acting like a used-car salesman crossed with a Rottweiler. So, the boxes you see on that table, plus the cabinets behind me...along with two other rooms full of documentation at my home...have all been transferred from my father’s office, and I’m trying to sort through the chaos myself. Which is where you come in. I’d like you to sort through the debris, filing and organising—’

‘Lucas, I feel we have got off on the wrong foot here,’ Penny cut across him impatiently. ‘You see, Shauna misunderstood the situation when I came into the office. I really came—’

‘Do you take milk and sugar?’ Lucas asked her smoothly.

‘Just milk,’ Penny answered distractedly. Why wouldn’t he listen to her? she wondered angrily.

‘You see, the thing is that a number of my father’s documents have gone astray—some very important ones at that. Deeds and other documentation for an old plantation house on Arbuda... You probably haven’t heard of the island. It’s tiny—just south of the British Virgin Islands.’

‘Yes, I’ve heard of it.’ Penny felt a tingle of uneasiness; of course she had heard of Arbuda, it was the island where she had grown up, and it sounded as if he was talking about her father’s estate. ‘You’ve lost the deeds to a plantation house?’ she ventured cautiously.

‘Well, they are not lost, exactly. They are somewhere amidst the chaos.’ He waved a hand expansively to indicate the boxes and the cabinets behind him. ‘But I need to find them pretty quickly. My father was in the process of repossessing the estate when he died. He had been holding the deeds as collateral because the old guy who lives there, William Kennedy, had owed him money for years. They used to be business partners, but my father had problems with the guy and dissolved the partnership. He told me that out of sentiment he let the debt ride for longer than he should. Kennedy is a bit of a no-hoper, by all accounts. Better that he leaves the place before he gets any further into debt.’

‘Really?’ Penny could hear her tone hardening. How dared he talk about her father like that? A no-hoper, indeed! Who the hell did Lucas Darien think he was? Her father had worked hard all his life...he was a decent, honest man...unlike his father. Lawrence Darien had been nothing more than a pirate...luring her father onto the rocks of bankruptcy and then trying to steal his land. The worst thing her father had ever done was to go into partnership with that man. It had ruined him financially and spiritually.

‘Unfortunately I can’t proceed with the repossession order until I find some of the relevant documentation,’ Lucas continued, totally oblivious to the fact that Penny was rigid with fury. ‘And if I don’t find the documentation within the next two or three weeks my father’s plans for the place are down the tubes.’

‘What were your father’s plans for the place?’ Penny asked, trying not to sound too interested.

‘He owned the neighbouring beachfront property, and there are plans for one hundred houses to go up there. William Kennedy’s estate would provide vital access from the main road out to the beachfront development.’

They were going to build one hundred houses along that unspoilt coastline! Penny felt as if her heart had jumped into her mouth. She felt totally sick. All right, she no longer lived in Arbuda. Most of her time was spent at sea. But when she was given leave she always went home...loved her weeks of solitude, just walking and lapping up the scenery. The countryside around her family home was among some of the most unspoilt and beautiful in the Caribbean. It was a natural habitat for rare species of flora and fauna. How the hell had Lawrence Darien managed to get planning permission for one hundred houses?

‘Unfortunately the building permission for the land runs out in a month’s time, so if we don’t make a start before then permission will be revoked due to a change of administration in the planning department in Arbuda.’

‘You mean your father greased somebody’s palm in the planning office but that person is no longer there?’ Penny murmured in a brittle tone.

‘Probably.’ Lucas shrugged. ‘Anyway, we can’t start the building work without the access through Kennedy’s land, and if we don’t get that within the next few weeks the whole idea is out the window.’

‘What a shame.’ Penny’s tone was dry.

‘Yes...isn’t it?’ Lucas took a sip of his coffee and regarded her steadily over the rim of the cup. ‘So, you see, the sooner you can start sifting through the files and boxes the more chance I have of finishing my father’s last project.’

Penny didn’t say anything to that—her mind was working overtime. If those documents weren’t found before the end of the month then the building wouldn’t go ahead...plus it would stall her father’s eviction from the land.

Could she continue with this pretence of being Mildred Bancroft, find the documents and then misappropriate them? All she would have to do was hide them somewhere, giving her father a few weeks’ leeway until the danger had passed. The idea slipped surreptitiously into her mind.

But that would be dishonest, a little voice argued sharply, and she was not a dishonest person. Plus the real Mildred could turn up at any moment, exposing her as a fraud.

Then again, Lucas’s father had been dishonest in his dealings with her father—plus he had obtained building permission fraudulently. She would only be helping to put that right.

In fact, if she misappropriated the documents for her father’s property she would be helping to conserve an area of outstanding natural beauty, as well as buying time for her father. In a few weeks he would be harvesting the sugar cane and he would have enough money to make an interim payment towards clearing his debt. Okay, it was just prolonging his time on the estate, but it was better than giving up.

‘So, when do you think you can start?’ Lucas asked her suddenly.

Penny took a deep breath. She could probably manage to fake a few days as a PA. She had secretarial skills, and the management course she had taken before taking over the running of the beauty spa would stand her in good stead. ‘How about straight away?’ she answered quickly, before she could change her mind.

CHAPTER TWO

THEY said that night was the mother of council, and it was probably true—because all that night Penny tossed and turned and regretted the wild impulse that had made her pretend to be Lucas Darien's PA.

It had been a crazy thing to do. Mildred Bancroft could turn up tomorrow, and then she would be in deep trouble. Lucas could call the police; she could be prosecuted for fraud. Penny stared up at the fan that whirled around on the ceiling of her hotel bedroom and felt sick with apprehension.

All her life she had played by the rules...And now, due to one moment of insanity, she could be in deep trouble. But she had just been so incensed by Lucas's cavalier remarks about her father...a no-hoper, indeed! Her father had been a successful businessman before getting involved with Lawrence Darien. And as for Lawrence going easy on her father out of sentiment because they had once been partners...well, frankly there was more truth in one of the brothers Grimm fairytales than there was in that!

Lawrence had been out to ruin her father. The feud between the men went back years, to a time when they had been successful business partners. And the reason they had first fallen out was not over money, but over the love of a woman...and the woman had been Penny's mother.

Before she had married Penny's father, Clara had dated Lawrence Darien—had been head over heels in love with him, by all accounts. Then she had discovered he already had a wife in Puerto Rico, and a son! Clara had been devastated and had sought solace in the arms of William Kennedy. Two months later they had married.

Lawrence had been furious and had disappeared back to Puerto Rico, vowing revenge and leaving their business dealings unfinished.

Her father had gone back to running his estate and had tried to put Lawrence Darien out of his mind. Penny had been born twelve months later and the couple had seemed very happy. Penny had enjoyed an idyllic childhood, and if Lawrence Darien was mentioned it had only been briefly in passing. Yet Penny suspected that her father had never been completely sure of his wife's love for him, that there had always been that knowledge that he had captured the beautiful Clara by default, that she had really only married him on the rebound.

Then, when she was sixteen, Penny's mother had died and everything had changed.

Lawrence Darien had turned up at the funeral. He had offered his profuse condolences to her father and the two men had seemed to rekindle their friendship...and later their old business ties. Their partnership had never been legally terminated, so it had been easy to pick up where they had left off. And her father had found himself investing in land and dealing in property that sometimes he hadn't even seen.

Penny had been uneasy about the reunion. She remembered the two men sitting out on the porch until late at night drinking...She remembered the hard glint in Lawrence's eyes whenever her mother's name was mentioned. When she had pointed this out to her father he had waved it away as her imagination. But it hadn't been her imagination. Lawrence had systematically and ruthlessly set out to ruin her father. And by the time William had realised the fact it was too late.

Her father's judgement had been flawed not because he was a no-hoper or stupid, but because he had been in a state of grief. And Lawrence had taken advantage of that. Had even managed to get hold of the deeds of their estate. Now, almost thirteen years down the line, even after death he was about to exact his last and terrible revenge. The loss of the estate would kill her father; she felt sure of that.

Penny tossed and turned in her bed. If there was an opportunity to even the score wasn't she right to take it?

She stared up at the fan on the ceiling. She remembered the last time she had seen Lawrence Darien. She remembered asking him why he had treated her father so ruthlessly. He had smiled at her with cold contempt. 'I always settle old scores,' he had murmured, before turning his back on her.

Well, wasn't it her turn to settle the score once and for all? she asked herself angrily. For her mother, who had been badly hurt at that man's hands, as well as her father...

Finally, as dawn broke outside, Penny drifted into sleep. But her slumber was beleaguered by wild, terrifying dreams. Lawrence Darien was pursuing her through dark corridors. 'If you think you can fool a member of my family then you are wrong,' he told her when finally he caught up with her.

The touch of his hand on her shoulder made her blood curdle, but as he swung her around to face him something happened. The cold, angry face didn't belong to Lawrence—it was Lucas who was holding her.

'There is a price to pay for deception,' he murmured, his eyes on her lips. And suddenly the feeling of the dream changed from deeply troubled to intensely sensual. 'I hope you can afford to pay...'

'What is your price?' she asked huskily.

Then he leaned towards her and his lips crushed against hers in a kiss that was so incredibly passionate it was mind-blowing. Her senses reeled, as if she had just been pushed out of a plane at thirty thousand feet. She kissed him back, wanting so much more, wanting his hands on her body...

The shrill ring of the alarm made her sit upright. Her heart was thundering...and she felt incredibly turned on. That was the weirdest dream she had ever had. Even now the erotic intensity of it was deeply disturbing...so real it seemed to mock her somehow.

She pushed the covers of the bed back and went through to the bathroom to run a shower. Obviously she had eaten too late last night...or maybe it was the heat of this room. The air-conditioning didn't seem to be working properly and the fan was ineffectual.

If she was going to stay here for another night she should report it at the reception desk. Should she stay another night? Should she go through with this deception? Or should she fly home and comfort her father...help him pack up a lifetime of belongings, ready to move. Her company had told her she could take up to five weeks' leave, so she had time to organise the move.

The thought made a shiver of anger run through her. Why should her father move from his home? It was outrageous. Why should Lawrence Darien get away with what he had done? No, she would stay here and risk playing the part of Mildred Bancroft for today at least...

Maybe she would be lucky and find the papers straight away...put them somewhere Lucas would never think of looking and then fly back to Miami to join her ship. Lucas Darien might never connect her with the missing papers...might never find out who she really was. And, even if he did, mislaying papers was hardly major fraud.

'Mildred...? Mildred...? Mildred, are you deaf?'

Penny looked up as she suddenly realised that Lucas was talking to her. 'Oh, sorry! I was miles away.'

'What on earth were you thinking about?' Lucas perched on the edge of her desk and grinned at her.

His closeness was deeply unsettling, as was the way his eyes crinkled at the edges when he smiled at her. 'I was thinking...'

Her mind groped for an excuse. She could hardly tell him that she hadn't recognised her own name! Or that she had been thinking that expecting to find the missing papers in one working day had been wildly optimistic. She had been in this office since nine, hadn't even bothered taking a lunch break and it was now time to go home...and there was no sign of the missing papers and depressingly she had only cleared two filing cabinets.

'I was just thinking that it must be nearly dinner time...my stomach is starting to feel like my throat's been cut,' she improvised.

'I'm not surprised. You've had no lunch and you've been working very hard.' Lucas looked with approval at the way she had neatly and methodically catalogued everything she had taken from the cabinets. 'You are very thorough.'

Penny shrugged. She was meticulous and organised in her running of the spa; she did accounts, kept track of stock, dealt with clients and staff. Putting Lucas's office in order was relatively simple, if somewhat time consuming.

'You better call it a day now, though,' Lucas said as he glanced at his watch. 'Shauna left half an hour ago.'

'Did she?' Penny was surprised she hadn't heard the other woman leave. 'I didn't realise it was that late.'

Lucas grinned. 'She had a hot date, and I didn't have the heart to tell her she was actually leaving early...she has put in a lot of overtime these last few days.'

Lucas could be very nice, Penny thought hazily as her eyes drifted over him, and he looked extremely handsome in that dark suit. She wondered if he worked out to get that superbly fit physique, or if it just came naturally to him. Her gaze moved towards the penetrating intensity of his dark eyes, to the soft curve of his lips, and suddenly she found herself remembering her dream this morning...the sensual way he had kissed her. Heat licked its way through her entire body at the memory.

Hastily she pulled her gaze away from his face. That dream had been absurd, she told herself as she transferred her attention to the last pile of papers on her desk. Being attracted to Lucas Darien would be asking for trouble. Behind all that charm he was probably just like his father...he was probably married as well...Although hadn't Shauna said something about him not being in a good mood due to his relationship with his girlfriend ending? So maybe he wasn't married? Not that she cared.

'By the way, Mildred, I need some details from you so I can put you in the system—you know, the usual kind of thing...your bank account number so I can organise your salary payments direct to your bank account, and—'

'If you don't mind I'd like to wait until my two-week trial period is over before you put me into the system,' Penny cut across him swiftly. She was amazed at how coolly self-assured she sounded, when in reality her heart was starting to beat with fear and dread.

Lucas regarded her steadily, his dark eyes never wavering from her face. 'Why is that, then? Are you thinking you might not want to stay?'

'No...' Penny tried to smile. She had to play this very carefully, because if Lucas found out she was an impostor things could turn very nasty, very quickly. 'I'd just like to keep things on a casual footing until we decide to make my job permanent.'

'You mean our trial period is a two-way street?' Lucas shrugged. 'That's fair enough...' He grinned. 'I'd better be on my best behaviour, then, if I want to keep you.'

Penny was intensely tempted to relax and grin back at him, make an equally jesting remark. It would be all too easy to be taken in by his amiable manner, she thought hazily as she looked into the warmth of his eyes...all too easy to respond to him and relax her guard, and then...then he'd discover she wasn't really

Mildred Bancroft and all hell would break loose. So instead she just nodded her head. 'Yes, good idea,' she remarked, and smiled lightly before turning away from him to continue going through the remainder of the papers in front of her.

'So how about if I start by offering you a lift home?' Lucas continued.

'That really isn't necessary...but thank you anyway.' Once again she gave him a very brief, cool smile before continuing on with her work.

But she was only pretending to be deeply engrossed in what she was doing; in reality she was intensely aware of his close proximity and she wished he would move away.

'I know it's not necessary, but I'm offering anyway.' Lucas seemed completely undeterred by her frosty responses. 'Whereabouts are you living, Mildred?'

The casual question caused a deep ripple of anxiety inside Penny. She wished she knew something about her namesake. Where was Mildred from? What information did Lucas already possess? She looked up at him, consternation clear in her green eyes. She hated this...she was no good at lying...she was going to be found out. Panic clouded her mind.

Then suddenly the fog lifted and she remembered something Lucas had said when he was interviewing her. Mildred's last job had been three years as PA to Lieutenant Colonel Montgomery Cliff in Barbados. She latched on to the memory in grateful desperation.

'Since leaving Barbados I've been in a state of flux, really. A lot of my possessions are still in storage, so at the moment I'm staying in a hotel here in San Juan.' Considering the only part of the statement that was true was the end bit, it sounded remarkably convincing. Penny found herself marvelling at her own ingenuity.

'So I take it it's not just Lucas Shipping that's on trial? It's Puerto Rico as well?' Lucas hazarded a guess. 'You're not sure you want to stay here?'

Penny nodded, willing to go with that theory and praying he would call a halt to the questions now.

'Well, I don't think you will regret coming to Puerto Rico. It's a truly beautiful island—very exotic, mile after mile of stunning beaches, a rainforest and mountain scenery that is quite breathtaking...plus its people are amongst some of the warmest and most hospitable of the Caribbean.' He grinned, a boyishly teasing grin. 'However, speaking as someone who has lived here most of his life, I'm obviously biased...'

She smiled back at him. 'Obviously.'

'So where are you from originally?'

The follow-up question was unexpected. 'Well, I...' Penny coughed to clear her throat. If she told him she was from Arbuda he was going to put two and two together before very long. 'I'm originally from Barbados.' She stuck to the same island that she was supposed to have worked on...in the hope that it might simplify things and she might remember what she had told him.

'Nice island. It must have been a wonderful place to grow up.'

'Yes...wonderful...' Penny could feel herself growing very hot and uncomfortable.

'Do you still have family in Barbados?'

'Eh...' She coughed again, and caught her breath.

'You okay?' He reached and slapped her on the back as she struggled to regain a lungful of air.

'Fine...thank you...' she wheezed.

He stood up and went to get her a glass of water from the drinking tap just outside the office door. Penny watched him surreptitiously from beneath her eyelashes. Did he have suspicions about her? she wondered. He seemed to be asking a lot of questions.

She had managed to compose herself by the time he returned, but she pretended that she was still short of breath just in case he started to resume his questions. But Lucas didn't pick up where he had left off; he just watched as she sipped the ice-cool water.

'Thank you,' she whispered hoarsely as she put the cup down.

'You're welcome.' He smiled, and then stretched over to switch off the desk lamp beside her. 'Come on, let's get out of here. I think we've both worked hard enough for one day.'

Penny reached for her bag, glad to push her chair back and stand up. She desperately wanted to get away from him in case more questions were suddenly fired at her.

'Right, well, I'll see you tomorrow morning,' she said briskly.

He glanced over at her with a raised eyebrow. 'It's Saturday tomorrow, Mildred.'

'Is it?' Penny's heart sank. The weekend was the last thing she needed right now. It was vital she found those files before Mildred turned up and blew her cover...a two-day break could be disastrous. 'I'd lost track of time,' she murmured.

'Actually, I was going to ask you if you wouldn't mind doing some overtime this weekend?' Lucas asked as he switched off the overhead light and then held the door for her to precede him out of the office. 'The thing is that I really need to find those missing documents, and time is not on my side.'

'Yes, I quite understand.' Penny grabbed the straw gratefully. 'I don't mind doing a bit of overtime at all, Lucas. I've got nothing planned this weekend anyway.'

'Great.' Lucas smiled across at her. 'I'll make it worth your while financially, of course.'

Penny found herself waving a hand in airy dismissal. She couldn't have cared less what Lucas was planning to pay her because she didn't plan on sticking around to take any of his money. 'We'll sort that out at a later date, once I've decided to stay. Or you've decided you *want* me to stay...' she added hastily, not wishing to sound too sure of herself.

'I get the feeling that it's a rare occurrence for employers not to want you to stick around,' Lucas said with a grin as he opened the outer door for her.

'Modesty prevents me from answering that question.' Penny couldn't resist smiling back at him. It sounded as if he didn't have any suspicions about her at all...that had just been her guilty conscience. He'd probably just been making polite conversation when he'd asked her a few questions about herself. She was going to have to stop being so edgy around him otherwise he was bound to suss her out.

'So, where can I drop you?' Lucas asked as he locked the office door. 'My car is just down the road.'

'I'm going to get the bus, Lucas—'

'Don't be silly.' He strode away from her towards the entrance to a car park, leaving Penny little option but to follow.

In one way she was glad to get a lift back; she was tired and hot...On the other hand Lucas would know where she was now...would be able to go into the hotel and enquire about her.

Lucas unlocked a silver-grey Mercedes and she slipped into the passenger seat. Although it was nearly six, and the sun was starting to set in a blaze of orange and pink light, the heat of the day was still intense. The cool air from the conditioning unit in the car was blissful.

‘So, where to?’ Lucas asked as he pulled the car out of the side street and into the busy flow of traffic on a one-way street.

‘I’m staying in the old quarter of San Juan.’

‘Picturesque down there, isn’t it?’ Lucas remarked as he waited for the traffic to move.

‘Yes, it’s lovely.’

‘Which hotel?’

‘Casa del Clarinda. It’s only a small hotel. It’s on—’

‘Yes, I know exactly where it is.’

‘Oh...’ Penny fell silent. She wished he hadn’t said that, because for some reason it made her feel even more vulnerable. Now she was wondering if he knew the owners...After all it *was* a small hotel, and it was strange he knew ‘exactly’ where it was. She imagined him bumping into them in some bar somewhere and saying, *You have my PA Mildred Bancroft staying with you.* And the puzzled looks on their faces.

Then he’d start to describe her. *Long blonde hair, about twenty-eight, green eyes, five foot six....*

Oh, that sounds like Penny Kennedy.

A cold shiver ran through her.

‘Is the air-conditioning a bit fierce?’ Lucas glanced across at her.

‘No, I’m fine.’

‘You’re shivering. Wind down the window and let some warm air in if you want.’

‘Thanks.’ Lucas Darien didn’t miss much, she thought warily.

The car picked up a bit of speed as the traffic thinned out, and warm air flowed in, brushing the heavy weight of her hair back from her face. ‘How come you know where my hotel is?’ she asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

‘It’s got a very good reputation. Everyone knows it.’

It didn’t sound as if he knew the owners...relief was immense.

‘I was thinking that tomorrow you should work up at my house,’ Lucas continued casually. ‘I have two whole rooms full of my father’s files up there, so the sooner you can make a start the better.’

Two rooms! It had taken her a whole day to get through two filing cabinets, so how long would it take her to get through that lot? she wondered distractedly. By the sounds of things she would be extremely lucky if she found those missing files before Mildred Bancroft arrived.

‘But don’t worry—I’ll give you a hand to sort through them,’ Lucas continued when she didn’t say anything. ‘I’ve got time tomorrow.’

‘Oh, really, there is no need,’ Penny assured him hastily. The last thing she needed was Lucas watching her every move; it had been bad enough having to share an office with him today.

‘We’ll get through them quicker with two of us working.’

‘I suppose you’re right.’ There was little else she could say. Penny’s heart sank. If he found the documents all this could be for nothing.

Lucas turned left, and the car bumped over the cobbled road as they entered the old quarter of San Juan. Penny knew this area quite well as her ship often pulled into port here. It was an area that was over five hundred years old and had been designated as a world heritage site. Buildings that were Spanish in character flanked the quaint narrow streets; they were painted cool pastel shades and had wrought-iron balustrades, some filled with a profusion of flowers.

‘You can drop me here, if you like,’ she said as they approached the crossroads that led down to her hotel.

‘I’ll drop you at the door; it’s no problem,’ Lucas answered in a tone that brooked no argument. ‘What made you decide to come to Puerto Rico, Mildred?’ he asked idly as he turned slowly down her road.

‘Well...the agency offered me this job and I thought it sounded interesting...’ She felt slightly breathless. ‘I like to move around...see different places...’

‘You’re a bit of a free spirit, I take it?’ He glanced over at her speculatively.

‘Yes, I suppose I am.’ At least that was the truth. She did like travelling—it had been one of the reasons she had applied for a job on a cruise liner.

‘That’s something we have in common, then.’ He pulled up outside her hotel. ‘One of the reasons I started a shipping company was my fascination with faraway shores.’

‘Did your father help you build up your business?’ she asked curiously.

‘No, he was never interested in trade on the high seas...just on dry land.’

‘And were you involved in his property deals?’ She didn’t know why she asked him that; curiosity, she supposed. There was a part of her that couldn’t help wondering how close he had been to his father and if he knew just how shady the man had been.

‘No, I was always too busy with my own business. Why do you ask?’

‘I just wondered if you had any idea where we should start looking in those files tomorrow,’ she improvised wildly, and was suddenly glad that it was dark and he couldn’t see how red her skin had become. She shouldn’t have asked that question; it wasn’t a good idea to sound too interested in his affairs.

‘No...unfortunately I don’t.’

‘Never mind. I’m sure between us we’ll find them tomorrow.’ She spoke positively.

‘Let’s hope so.’

And let’s hope I find them first, she added silently as she reached to open the car door. To her surprise Lucas got out and came around to open the door for her. Such old-fashioned courtesy took her aback.

She accepted the hand he offered and stepped out onto the pavement. The touch of his skin against hers sent a strange sensation of intense awareness shooting through her. Abruptly she let go of him.

‘Thank you for the lift.’ Her voice was primly polite.

‘You’re welcome.’ He grinned. ‘It’s the least I could do after you’ve worked so hard, and through your lunch hour.’

The evening air was warm, perfumed by the bougainvillea and jasmine that cascaded from the balcony of the hotel.

For a moment she stood staring up at him. Lucas Darien was incredibly handsome, she thought hazily. Tall and lean, yet there was that air of latent power about him. Maybe it was the breadth of his shoulders that

gave him such a commanding presence, or maybe it was the way he met her eyes with such calm self-assurance. Whatever it was, he seemed to just exude sex appeal.

‘I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning, about eight-forty-five,’ he said quietly.

She was so mesmerised, looking up into the darkness of his eyes, that it took a moment for her to register that him picking her up might not be a good idea. If he was to walk into the hotel and ask for Ms Mildred Bancroft she’d be in deep water.

‘It’s okay,’ she said hastily. ‘If you give me your address I’ll take a taxi.’

‘You like to be independent, don’t you?’ He smiled. ‘But it’s no problem. I have to come down to the dockside in the morning anyway. I have some business to take care of.’

‘Oh...but—’

‘If I’m running late I’ll phone you. What’s your room number?’

‘Em...I...I can’t remember. But, listen, it’s just as easy for me to catch a cab and—’

Lucas reached out and tipped her chin upward, so that she was forced to look directly into his eyes again. The contact was brief and light, yet the sensation sent shivers of pandemonium racing through her from nowhere.

‘I’ll pick you up,’ he said firmly. ‘Don’t worry about your room number—I’m sure the Casa del Clarinda has only one Mildred Bancroft in residence.’

That’s what he thinks, Penny reflected in alarm as she watched him walk away from her.

‘See you tomorrow, Mildred.’

‘Yes...tomorrow...’

Lucas got back into his car, but he didn’t drive away immediately. Instead he waited and watched as she turned to walk into the hotel. For a moment she was silhouetted against the light from the foyer. He noticed the shapely curve of her figure in the pale blue dress, the way her hair shone like spun gold. He remembered the way she had looked up at him a moment ago, the way her eyes had been flecked with some deep emotion...She had looked at him like that several times today. It was as if one moment she was deeply distrustful of him...ready to do battle with him...and the next she relaxed and gave him a most breathtakingly beautiful smile.

He would give anything to know exactly what was going on in her mind...

Lucas put the car into gear and pulled away from the sidewalk. The delicate scent of her perfume still lingered in the car, just as the memory of her wide clear green eyes lingered in his mind. There was something about the delectable Ms Bancroft that intrigued him, an air of mystery that needed further investigation...

CHAPTER THREE

PENNY woke at first light and quickly showered and dressed in a lightweight trouser suit that was a pale shade of oyster-pink. She applied a little make-up, to disguise the fact that she hadn't slept very well again, swept her hair back from her face with a clip and then went downstairs to the reception, to see if she could solve the little problem of what would happen when Lucas asked for Ms Bancroft.

Penny's heart sank as she noticed that the woman receptionist who was normally on duty wasn't there. Instead it was the man who had checked her in on her arrival. He was in his early thirties, and had a swarthy complexion and eyes that were boldly assessing. Penny hadn't particularly liked him—had thought he was just a little too interested in her.

'Morning, Ms Kennedy,' he greeted her with a smile as she approached the counter. 'You're up bright and early.'

Penny tried not to notice the male interest in his eyes as they swept over her figure in a rather blatant way, and instead smiled back at him. 'Thought I'd take a stroll before the heat of the day got too intense.'

'Good idea. Have you any special plans for the rest of the day?'

'Actually, I'm going out for the day...with a friend.' She kept her smile in place with great difficulty. Why couldn't the nice woman from last night have been on duty? she wondered with an inner sigh. She wouldn't have asked anything. 'In fact, he should be picking me up in a couple of hours.' She kept her voice light. 'Will you still be on duty?'

'Yes, I'm here until ten.'

'If you'd ring me when he arrives that would be great.' She fixed him with her most winning smile. 'Oh...and I almost forgot,' she said as she made to turn away. 'He'll probably ask for me by the name of Mildred Bancroft. That's my professional name.'

'What profession is that, then?' the man asked immediately, the light of interest rekindled.

'Oh, I do a bit of writing in my spare time, under the name of Mildred Bancroft. That's why I'm in Puerto Rico, actually, to do a spot of research for a book. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell the other receptionists, so that if a call comes for Mildred Bancroft they will put it through to my room, or take a message for me? I don't want to miss any important calls from my publisher.'

The receptionist opened his mouth, probably to ask her what she wrote, but Penny wasn't about to start embroidering her tale any further. She'd had enough lies for one day. 'Anyway, I'd better dash,' she said quickly, and pretended to look at her watch. 'The day is flying by, and I won't get my walk if I don't hurry.'

Her heart was thudding unevenly as she stepped outside into the bright sunlight. She hated all these lies. Had the man been convinced? she wondered. In case he hadn't she intended to find a shady spot to wait for Lucas's arrival, waylay him before he had a chance to go into the hotel.

Finding a shady place to sit and wait turned out to be easier than expected. There was a square directly opposite the hotel, and as luck would have it a tiny coffee bar was open. She took a seat in the window, so she could watch for Lucas's car in case he arrived early, and then ordered a cappuccino.

Hopefully she would find the missing files today. Then she would get a flight out of here and put this unpleasant business behind her. Her father need never know that she had meddled in his affairs...it would

just be a pleasant surprise for him when the eviction order didn't come through on the twenty-fifth. That was presuming she was successful in finding the documents, and that Mildred Bancroft didn't turn up and ruin everything.

She was on her second cup of coffee when she saw Lucas's car pull up outside the hotel. Hurriedly she put some dollar bills on the table and rushed out without waiting for her change.

'Good morning, Lucas.' She called to him from across the road as he locked his car door. For a moment she thought he hadn't heard her. Then he turned around.

'Morning.' He leaned back against the bonnet of the car and watched as she made her way across towards him.

A warm breeze blew her jacket back, giving a glimpse of a black lacy top that fitted her svelte figure like a second skin. His eyes swept over her, noticing the long length of her legs in the elegant trouser suit and the fact that she was wearing very high heels that were impeding her progress across the cobbled street.

'You're out and about very early this morning.' He grinned at her as she reached his side.

'Thought I'd get a bit of fresh air before the heat of the day closes in.'

'Good idea.' He smiled at her; it was a warm, inviting smile and it made her feel a bit breathless. There was something about Lucas Darien that seemed to set her pulses racing. She tried to tell herself it was just nervous tension, because of all these lies that she was telling, but deep down she knew there was more to it than that. The thing was that she found him dangerously attractive. She knew she shouldn't be drawn to him, that it was a bit like the fascination that a moth felt towards a flame, but she couldn't seem to help herself.

'I always think that the morning is the best part of the day,' Lucas said as he went around to open the passenger door for her.

'Especially when the rest of the time is going to be spent in an office,' she agreed, trying to concentrate on the conversation and not on him.

'Are you wishing you hadn't agreed to overtime this weekend, by any chance?' He grinned.

'No, I don't mind.'

'Well, I promise not to work you too hard today. We'll stop about midday and have a leisurely lunch—how's that?'

'Let's see how far we get through those files before we decide how much time off we can have,' Penny said noncommittally.

'If you are trying to impress me with your commitment to work then you are succeeding, Mildred Bancroft,' he said, a glint of humour in his dark eyes. 'Are you always so focused?'

'I try to be.' She got into the car and watched as he walked around to join her. It was true she usually had no problem concentrating on what was important. Trouble was, she seemed to be focusing on the wrong things when she was around him. He was very distracting. And the way he was dressed this morning was even more of a distraction. He was wearing casual clothes today, faded blue jeans and a pale blue T-shirt that seemed to emphasise the wide expanse of his chest and the taut flatness of his stomach. She was willing to bet that beneath that T-shirt there was a toned six-pack.

Swiftly she averted her eyes from him. Don't think about things like that, Penny, she told herself crossly. Keep focused on the reason you're here. Lucas Darien is the enemy.

He got into the car and smiled across at her. She smiled back at him. He had the sexiest eyes, she thought hazily.

'Don't forget your seatbelt,' he said.

‘No, of course not.’ Hastily she snapped out of her reverie and reached to put it on. Strange thing was, she hadn’t felt this strongly attracted to a man in years... The last person who had interested her like this was Nick, and that had ended in total disaster. He had been the reason she had left Arbuda and gone to work at sea.

She had been deeply in love with Nick. They had lived together for over a year and she had been committed to the relationship, had thought he was too. It had come as a hell of a shock to discover he had been seeing someone else behind her back. That all the nights he had said he was working overtime because they were saving up to get married he had in fact been wining and dining another woman. The betrayal had hurt; Penny had sworn nobody would ever get under her skin like that again... ever.

Even though her break-up with Nick had been two years ago it still pained her to think about it. Firmly she switched her attention to the scenery outside. They had left the town behind now, and the powerful car was climbing easily up narrow mountain roads. The countryside was green and tropical—they passed plantations of banana and grapefruit—and the view down over the tumbling greenery towards the turquoise of the sea was spectacular.

Lucas turned the car through a narrow driveway that twisted up through manicured gardens lined with palm trees, before coming to a standstill outside a large colonial-style house. Steps led up to a wide porch, which wrapped around the building and was furnished with wicker furniture and a swing chair that was positioned to give the best view through the trees towards the sea.

The first thing that struck Penny as she climbed out of the car was the silence of the surroundings. All she could hear was the rustle of the warm breeze in the palm trees and the sound of the birds. It reminded her of her father’s house in Arbuda.

‘You’ve got a lovely place here,’ Penny said as she walked up the steps with him to the veranda.

‘It used to be an old coffee plantation house, but previous owners sold it separately from the land many years ago. It had fallen into a bad state of disrepair when I bought it, and needed a lot of work to restore it back to its former beauty, but I think we got there in the end.’ He held open the screened door for her and allowed her to precede him into a large hallway.

Penny could see at once that no expense had been spared in restoring the beauty of the place. It had solid wooden floors covered by a Persian rug, and a wide sweeping staircase where a magnificent grandfather clock stood on the turn of the landing. She had a glimpse of a drawing room to the right, with gold and blue furnishings, and to the left a formal dining room with a long polished mahogany table. The house had a comfortable elegance that spoke of bygone days.

‘My study is at the back of the house—’ Lucas broke off as a door was flung open and a little girl raced down the corridor, closely followed by a black Labrador who barked excitedly.

‘Guess what’s happened this morning,’ the child said eagerly, reaching up so that Lucas would pick her up.

‘What’s happened?’ He obligingly scooped her up into his arms and then glanced over at the dog. ‘Be quiet, Flint,’ he said sternly, and the animal immediately fell silent, but stood wagging his tail and looking up at his master expectantly. ‘So what’s all the excitement about?’ Lucas asked the child.

‘Mrs Gordon was baking a cake and it burnt and black smoke came out of the oven and the smoke alarm rang and she shouted a lot.’

‘Sounds like a morning of high excitement.’ Lucas grinned over at Penny. ‘We never have a dull moment here. Mildred, this is my daughter, Isobel.’

Lucas had a child... Penny was completely taken aback by the discovery. Did that mean he also had a wife? Since Shauna had mentioned his break-up with his girlfriend she had more or less decided he must be single. But she should have known better. He was probably a womaniser, just like his father.

She was aware that the knowledge sent a curious pang of disappointment flooding through her.

The little girl looked over at her with wide, serious eyes. She only looked about six years of age, and she was adorable, with a cute heart-shaped face, straight shiny black hair and eyes that were so dark they looked almost jet-black.

‘Hello, Isobel.’ Penny smiled at her.

‘Hello.’ She smiled back.

A woman appeared in the corridor behind them, one hand on her ample hips and a frown marring her rounded face. ‘Isobel, come and clear up this mess you’ve made in the pantry, please.’

‘Yes, Mrs Gordon.’ Isobel didn’t look in the slightest bit chastened. In fact her eyes danced with mischief and merriment as she slipped down from her father’s arms and dutifully headed back towards the other woman.

‘I believe you’ve had a bit of an exciting morning in the kitchen, Mrs Gordon,’ Lucas said jovially.

‘The thermostat on the oven must be faulty,’ the woman said with a shake of her head. ‘I’ve never had such a disaster.’ She glared at the black Labrador as he tried to sneak past her to follow Isobel through the door. ‘And I’ve told you that the kitchen is no place for a dog,’ she said sternly, pointing a finger at him. ‘Out with you.’

Flint backed away and then stood staring at the door dejectedly as it banged closed behind the woman and child.

‘And that was Mrs Gordon, my housekeeper...cum nanny,’ Lucas said with a smile as he turned to lead the way down a side corridor. ‘Don’t be misled by her grumpy exterior; the woman is a treasure. Runs the house with smooth efficiency...Well, she usually does.’ Lucas grinned. ‘I’ve never known her burn anything before.’

‘We all have our off days,’ Penny murmured. ‘Your wife must be grateful for her help. This is a big house to keep in order.’

‘Unfortunately my wife died four years ago.’

‘I’m so sorry.’ Penny looked over at him in consternation. She felt guilty now, for thinking he was a womaniser like his father.

Lucas opened a door into what would have been a large airy study, but filing cabinets and boxes took up all the available space and practically obscured the French windows that lined one side of the room.

‘Told you there was a lot of sorting out to do,’ Lucas said as he glanced over and saw the expression on her face.

But Penny wasn’t thinking about the files and the amount of work; she was thinking how wrong it felt to be deceiving this man. Guilt was eating through her in waves. Maybe Lucas was nothing like his father... maybe she should come clean and admit exactly who she was?

Before she could say anything the phone on the desk rang and Lucas strode across to pick it up. ‘Hi... No, I haven’t found them yet. Hopefully they’ll turn up today, and we can have William Kennedy out promptly at the end of the month. Then the bulldozers can move in.’

Penny felt herself stiffen as she heard her father’s name mentioned in such a cold way.

‘I’ll ring you and keep you up to date, Salvador. Yes...no problem. How’s Maria? Well, give her my love.’ Lucas put the phone down and glanced over at her. ‘Are you okay?’ he asked, and she realised she was standing inside the open door just staring at him.

‘Yes...fine.’ Hastily she moved away from the door and closed it behind her.

‘That was Salvador. He’s a family friend as well as my solicitor. His wife is expecting their first child any day now, so it’s all excitement over there.’

‘I’m surprised he has the time to think about work on a Saturday,’ Penny said as she crossed towards the desk.

‘Yes, he’s a good man. I’m grateful to him for agreeing to take over from my late father’s solicitor. That guy was very shifty indeed. I didn’t trust him at all.’

Which was probably why his father had employed him, Penny thought wryly. He’d probably deliberately sought the services of a less than scrupulous solicitor.

‘So your friend is going to oversee the eviction order on Mr Kennedy?’

‘If I can find the relevant documents.’

Penny pretended to be engrossed in clearing a space on the office desk so that she could begin work. ‘Do you have any misgivings about this?’ she asked lightly.

‘About what?’

‘Evicting an old man from his property?’ She tried to keep her tone as casual as possible.

Lucas didn’t reply immediately, and she glanced over at him, suddenly realising how much she wanted him to say yes. Maybe he didn’t know how corrupt his father had been...maybe there were other things besides the dodgy solicitor that were concerning him. And if he admitted that to her she could tell him the truth. They could sit down and talk about this situation in a civilised manner and come to some arrangement that would save her father’s house.

He gave a wry smile. ‘That’s a strange question.’

‘Is it?’ Panic raced through her as she wondered if she had overstepped the line.

‘Yes.’ Lucas leaned back against the filing cabinet behind him and fixed her with a look that was deeply probing. ‘Why are asking that?’

‘I...I just remembered you saying that the man used to be your father’s business partner, and I wondered if there was a part of you that regretted having to take such a drastic course of action, that’s all.’

‘Well, you know what they say, Mildred...there can be no sentiment in business.’

It was the kind of cold, hard answer his father would have given, and Penny felt a wave of disappointment. She wanted to tell him that this wasn’t business, that this was a vendetta against an elderly, frail man—a vendetta that his cold-hearted father seemed determined to pursue even after death. But to say as much would be to reveal her hand, and she wasn’t sure that was the right thing to do...not after hearing him in action, speaking to his solicitor.

Lucas seemed keen to evict her father, probably because there was a hell of a lot of money riding on this property development. And, as he had just said, there was no sentiment when it came to business. There also seemed very little in the way of ethics or morality either, when it came to the Darien way of doing things.

‘Well, I suppose we ought to get started,’ she said instead as she took off her jacket and reached for one of the files. To hell with it anyway, she thought as she emptied it out onto her desk and ruthlessly started to rake through the contents, searching for her father’s deeds. Modern-day life seemed to be dog eat dog...she might as well just get in amongst the pack and make the most of this opportunity. It might be the only chance her father had of surviving.

The hours seemed to fly by after that. File followed file, and still there was no sign of the missing papers. When Lucas suggested breaking for lunch Penny shook her head. 'We need to get on. Time is against us as it is,' she murmured.

'Well, I'll tell you what—we'll have a working lunch, but on one condition only.'

'What's that?' She glanced across at him.

He smiled. 'That you stay and have dinner with me tonight.'

There was something about the way he issued the invitation that made her heart miss several beats. 'I really don't think I can,' she said hurriedly.

'Why not?'

'It's very kind of you...but I wouldn't want to intrude—'

'You're not intruding. I want you to stay.'

And the awful thing was that she wanted to stay, even though she knew she should be keeping her distance. 'Well, I suppose it would mean that we could do some more work later, after dinner.' She tried to justify the acceptance to herself.

'Are you for real?' Lucas fixed her with a teasing look.

The question and the way he looked at her made her skin flare with colour. 'Well...I'm just trying to be sensible. Time is imperative—'

'I think we will have done quite enough work by dinnertime,' he said firmly, and then pushed his chair back from the other side of the desk. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go through and see if Mrs Gordon will make us something to eat to tide us over until then.'

Penny sat back in her chair with a sigh as he left the room. If only he was cold and nasty this would be a lot easier. She glanced across to the other side of the desk and the files that he was working on and wondered if she should have a quick look through them before he got back. It would be just her luck if he found the papers. Then all this would be for nothing.

Hurriedly she got up and went around to try and scan through the remainder of his file. It would be a lot easier if she knew what the documents in question looked like, she thought.

Penny was leafing through a stack of letters when she came across some correspondence from her father that was dated last year. In excitement she started to delve deeper into the file. If there was one bit of information pertaining to her father in the box, then maybe the elusive documentation for his house would also be there.

She hadn't got very far when she heard Lucas's footsteps returning along the corridor outside.

Hastily Penny reached over and swapped his file with the one she had been working on. Then returned to her seat.

'How's it going?' Lucas strode in just as she sat down.

'Fine.' She smiled up at him.

'Found anything?' He put a china mug of coffee down beside her.

'Not yet...'

'Maybe I'll be lucky with this file,' he said casually as he sat back down across the desk from her and reached for the box next to him. 'I noticed there was a few letters from William Kennedy in here, so maybe

the documents for the house are here as well.'

'That does sound hopeful.' Penny could feel her stomach starting to tie into knots. She hadn't realised he'd already looked in the box. He was going to know that she had swapped them around!

'Strange...they don't seem to be here,' he murmured as he delved into the file.

'You mustn't be looking in the right box.' Penny got up and crossed to one of the filing cabinets behind him, busying herself putting away the papers she had already sorted. She couldn't bear to sit opposite him, because if he looked over at her directly and asked her if she had touched the file she was sure she would go bright red with guilt.

The door of the office opened and Mrs Gordon came in with some sandwiches. Isobel stood in the open doorway behind her.

'Daddy, you won't forget that you said you'd swim with me this afternoon,' she said shyly.

Lucas glanced over at his daughter and grinned. 'No, I won't forget, honey.'

The child smiled back and then ran into the office to climb up on his knee. 'How long will you be, Daddy?'

'Give me one hour and then I'll be all yours.' Lucas stroked her dark hair back from her face tenderly. 'Have you had some lunch?'

Isobel nodded. 'I had pizza.'

'Did you eat some salad with it?' Lucas asked with a raised eyebrow.

Isobel wrinkled her nose.

'You know you should eat something green, Issy...' Lucas said gently. 'We've talked about this before...remember?'

'There is green jelly for afterwards,' the little girl said solemnly. 'I'm going to eat that.'

'That doesn't count.' Lucas tickled her and she giggled breathlessly. 'You'd better eat some salad, young lady, or you are going to be in big trouble.'

'Okay...okay...' The child squealed with laughter as he tickled her some more.

'Good girl.' He kissed her on the forehead. 'Now, run along and let Daddy get back to work. I'll see you for a swim a little later.'

The child wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. 'I love you, Daddy.'

'I love you too.'

Isobel raced over to where Mrs Gordon was waiting for her by the door.

'Sorry about that,' Lucas said distractedly as he turned his attention back to his work. 'As you probably deduced, I'm going to have to leave you to it for a few hours and spend some time with my daughter.'

'That's okay.' Penny returned to her seat. The tender exchange between father and daughter had touched her. Lucas was obviously a devoted dad, and it made her like him even more. 'It must be difficult, running a business and being a single father.'

'It's not easy,' he admitted with a nod. 'And I hate it when I have to put in overtime. But Mrs Gordon is reliable, and Isobel adores her, so that takes a lot of the strain out of things.' He reached for the file in front of him.

Penny waited for him to comment again about the missing letters, but he said nothing further about them.

She glanced over at him. He was reading a document and seemed deep in thought. Uneasily she went back to the pile of papers in front of her. She didn't dare risk looking through the file with the letters in it, deciding that could wait until he'd left the room.

Silence descended between them, broken only by the rustling of paper and the occasional scribble of her pen as she labelled and reorganised.

'There's a stack of papers here that I think can be thrown away,' she murmured after a while. 'They seem to be mainly advertising bumph, but maybe you'd better look through them first, in case there is anything important there.'

'Fine—just put them to one side for me.' He barely looked up.

What was he so engrossed in? she wondered.

Silence resumed. Flint wandered in and sat down next to Lucas's chair. He leaned his head against his master's knee and Lucas stroked his head absently. The dog's breathing seemed loud, and the occasional thump of his tail on the polished floor distracted Penny.

'Well, that's all very interesting,' Lucas remarked suddenly.

'What is?'

'I've found some paperwork regarding the business partnership between my father and Kennedy.'

'Oh?'

'And I've found the deeds to the Kennedy property.' He held up some yellowing documents and smiled across at her.

Penny's eyes widened. She couldn't believe it; the damn papers had been in her file all along. If she hadn't swapped them over she would have found them. This was just her damn luck! 'Oh...great!' From somewhere she tried to insert enthusiasm into her voice. 'Does that mean you'll be able to proceed with the eviction straight away?'

'According to Salvador there are a few more papers I could do with—copies of earlier warning notices that have been sent to Kennedy, that kind of thing. But having the deeds strengthens my hand considerably.' Lucas pushed his chair back from the desk. 'I'll put them somewhere safe and take them to Salvador on Monday morning...or maybe tomorrow if he is free.'

Penny watched as he walked across and put them in the top drawer of a filing cabinet, then locked the file and put the key in his jeans pocket.

'I'm going to spend a little time with my daughter,' Lucas said easily. 'So, can I leave you to carry on sorting through the files and looking for those notices...?'

'Of course.' Her smile was somewhat strained.

She watched as he left the room, closely followed by Flint. Then she leaned back in her chair and groaned. If only she hadn't swapped that file...!

She supposed her only chance now was to find some of the other papers. Her eyes moved around the room, taking in the various boxes and metal cabinets. Suddenly her task seemed even more daunting than before. Apart from everything else, she had the horrible feeling that the real Mildred was going to turn up sooner than those papers were.

CHAPTER FOUR

PENNY worked solidly for the rest of the afternoon, but there was no sign of the missing papers. Her glance kept going over to the filing cabinet where the deeds to her father's house were. Knowing they were there and yet being unable to reach them was extremely frustrating. She wondered for the hundredth time why Lucas had locked them away.

The sound of a child's laughter drifted in from outside and Penny got up to look out of the window. She could just see the edge of a swimming pool and a long terrace, where a table and chairs were placed invitingly under the shade of a large parasol. As she watched Lucas swim into view, and then Isobel also appeared as she ran around the side of the pool dressed in a red swimming costume.

Lucas stood in the water and held his arms up for her. With a shriek of pleasure the child jumped in and then Lucas lifted her onto his shoulders.

'Again...again...' Her voice drifted in to Penny, as did her chuckles of delight as Lucas spun her around before helping her to get out so that the whole performance could be repeated.

He had infinite patience with her, Penny thought with a smile as she watched the game. Isobel clearly adored him. Water glistened on the powerful breadth of his shoulders and arms as he hoisted himself up out of the pool with athletic ease. And suddenly Penny found her mind drifting from how good a dad he was to what a fabulous body he had. His torso was strong and toned and incredibly powerful. She found herself wondering what it would feel like to be cradled in those arms...The very idea made her stomach muscles contract sharply with a thrust of pure desire.

Angrily she turned away from the window and returned to her work. She needed to stop thinking about Lucas in any other terms than those of the enemy. Anything else was pure folly. She was so annoyed with herself that it gave her the impetus to push on with even more speed through the next box of papers. But it didn't do her much good. The papers were nowhere in sight.

By the time Lucas returned to the office an hour later she had worked her way through several more boxes to no avail, and was feeling very dispirited.

'You've done well,' Lucas said with approval as he noticed the space she had cleared in the room. 'Any luck with those papers?'

She shook her head.

'Never mind. They are not so crucial now that I have the deeds. Maybe we'll find them tomorrow...' He smiled at her. 'In the meantime, why don't you join me in a pre-dinner drink out on the porch?'

Penny leaned back in her chair and looked up at him. He'd changed, she noticed, into black jeans and a black short-sleeved shirt. His hair was sleeked back from his face and was still damp from a shower.

It was a pity she found him so attractive, she thought hazily. It made the situation so much more perilous.

'What do you say?' He fixed her with a look that was slightly teasing. 'Shall we watch the sun go down over an ice-cold gin and tonic?'

The offer sounded incredibly tempting. Frankly, she'd had enough of being cooped up in here for one day. Maybe a drink was just what she needed. 'That would be very nice.' Leaving her jacket hanging over

the back of the chair, she stood up and followed him out of the office.

Although the air was warm outside there was a delicious breeze that soothed the senses. Penny leaned against the wooden rail of the veranda and stared out across the garden through the tracery of trees towards the sea. The sun was starting to go down in a brilliant blaze of blood orange that streaked the sky and lit the sea with incandescent splashes of fire.

Lucas joined her and handed across her drink.

‘Thanks.’ She smiled at him as she took it. ‘You have a fabulous view from up here.’

‘Yes, I do.’

For a moment there was silence as they both contemplated the sunset. She supposed she should have insisted on going back to her hotel, but it was very pleasant standing here with him. She turned slightly and looked over at him, only to find that his eyes were on her. Was it her imagination or was he watching her very closely?

‘I suppose coming from Barbados you are used to stunning views?’ he remarked.

It was a casual enough statement, yet it instantly set Penny on guard. ‘Barbados is a beautiful island,’ she agreed, her tone carefully neutral.

‘Where did you used to live? The Caribbean side of the island or the Atlantic?’

‘The Atlantic.’ It wasn’t a lie exactly; she had lived on the Atlantic coast of Barbados.

‘The views are spectacular there,’ he said. ‘Especially along the east coast road towards Bethsheba.’

‘I take it you have visited Barbados?’ She tried to change the slant of the conversation so that it was focused on him. These lies were making her far too uncomfortable.

‘I go over on business a lot. But I also spent my honeymoon there.’

‘That’s a romantic place for a honeymoon,’ she said softly.

‘Yes...’ Lucas paused for a moment, and Penny thought she glimpsed some raw emotion that was almost verging on anger in the darkness of his eyes, but it was hard to see him clearly. The sun was sinking fast now, and deep purple clouds of darkness were stealing over the landscape, shadows lengthening across the gardens and the porch.

‘You must miss her a lot,’ Penny said.

He inclined his head. ‘It’s been hard these last few years.’

Night dropped like a blanket over everything, and the sound of insects filled the heat of the air with a heavy cacophony.

‘Do you mind my asking what happened to her? Or is that too personal a question?’

‘No, I don’t mind you asking.’ He shrugged. ‘She died trying to save a man from drowning. He shouldn’t even have been in the water. Not only had he had too much to drink, but also they had issued storm warnings that day. The beach had red flags flying but he chose to ignore them. The really ironic thing was that the guy was okay. He managed to get back to shore, and Kay, who was a strong swimmer and taught physical education, didn’t...’

Penny was horrified. ‘Were you there when it happened?’

Lucas shook his head. ‘No. I was at work. The first I knew of it was when the police turned up at the office to give me the news.’

'I'm so sorry, Lucas. You must have been devastated.'

'It took me a while to come to terms with it, that's for sure.' Lucas took a sip of his drink. 'Anyway, that's enough of that depressing subject. Tell me about you.'

'Me? Well, there's not much to tell.' The swift change of subject caught her unawares.

'I don't believe that for one moment.' He grinned at her. 'I bet there are a lot of intriguing things you could tell me.'

'Depends what you call intriguing.' Penny was distinctly uncomfortable now.

'Well, for one thing how come your CV is less than accurate?'

'Is it?' Penny felt colour starting to seep into her face.

'You know it is. By all accounts, according to the paperwork the agency sent me, you should be fifty-five.' He grinned. 'How old are you anyway?'

'You know it's not gentlemanly to ask a lady her age,' Penny hedged.

'Well, I've never laid claim to being a gentleman,' he said with a spark of humour in his eye. 'I reckon you're twenty-six.'

'Twenty-eight,' she corrected him.

'So I rest my case. Something doesn't add up.'

'I've just found that employers tend to favour having an older woman as their PA, so I've used a little artistic licence on the forms, that's all.' She kept her voice airily light with intense difficulty. 'Once I'm in employment nobody has ever complained about my work.'

'And I'm not complaining either...at least not yet.' He grinned at her. 'So, apart from using artistic licence on forms, what else are you up to?'

'I beg your pardon?' Her heart bounced unevenly in her chest.

'What do you do in your spare time?' He clarified the question.

'Oh...I see.' She smiled and relaxed. 'Well, I like to read, listen to music, and do yoga for relaxation. And I learnt to sail when I lived in Ar...Barbados....' She trailed off in consternation. She had very nearly said Arbuda, had nearly blown her whole cover. Her heart raced against her chest. She was lousy at lying and she hated it. She especially hated lying to him—he seemed so...likeable.

His eyes flicked over her with a slow, assessing thoroughness. 'I like sailing too, when I get time. I have a yacht moored not far from here.'

At least he hadn't noticed her slip of the tongue, but she was going to have to be very careful.

'Maybe you'd like to accompany me one weekend?' he invited smoothly. 'As a thank-you for all your hard work.'

'That sounds wonderful.' She smiled. As she looked up into the darkness of his eyes she realised that it did indeed sound wonderful. She would have liked to spend more time with him. Get to know him better...

Hastily she looked away from him and sipped her drink. It wasn't going to happen. She was here for one reason only. He was her father's enemy and that was all she needed to know about him. Even thinking he was nice was a gross disloyalty.

‘Maybe we could go next weekend,’ he continued. ‘I’ve got a feeling that we should have all this paperwork under control by then.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ she said lightly.

‘Well, if I haven’t found the necessary papers by then I may as well kiss goodbye to the whole Arbuda deal, because the planning permission runs out soon.’ Lucas took a long swallow of his drink. ‘Which means I’ll probably lose my buyer for the project too.’

Penny looked up at him questioningly.

‘A builder has offered me a good price for the Kennedy estate plus the beachfront land, and I have accepted it because I have no intention of developing the project myself. Only snag is that if we can’t finalise by the end of this month the deal is off.’

‘Shame.’ Penny’s voice was dry.

‘Well, hopefully now I’ve found the deeds the other papers won’t be far behind and we can get things moving.’

Not if I can help it, Penny thought glumly. The nerve of the guy! He had already found a buyer for her father’s house and it didn’t even belong to him yet! She wished for the millionth time that she had found the deeds first and buried them deep at the bottom of some drawer, where Lucas wouldn’t find them for months. It would have served him right for heartlessly wanting to throw an old man out onto the streets.

The housekeeper came out of the doorway behind them. ‘Dinner is served.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Gordon.’ Lucas smiled at Penny. ‘Anyway, let’s not talk any more about business for one night,’ he said.

‘No, let’s not,’ she agreed lightly. ‘I think I’ll be seeing business papers and box files in my dreams tonight.’

Lucas laughed. ‘Sounds like a nightmare.’

In more ways than one, she thought as she followed him into the house.

The dining room was set with two places facing each other across the long table. Candlelight reflected and danced over the polished mahogany surface and silver cutlery. White lilies graced the sideboard next to them, scenting the room with their exotic fragrance.

‘These are my favourite flowers,’ Penny remarked as she stopped next to them to admire the display.

‘Mrs Darien always liked the house to be filled with fresh flowers.’ Mrs Gordon bustled past her to put some wine on the table. ‘Lilies were her favourite too.’

‘Mrs Gordon was devoted to my wife,’ Lucas told Penny when they were left alone again. ‘She looked after Kay when she was a little girl and she was the first person Kay thought of when we were looking for a housekeeper.’

Penny took her seat at the table. ‘It must be a weight off your mind, knowing you have someone for Isobel that your wife approved of.’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘Daddy...’ A small voice from the doorway made them both look round.

Isobel was standing just inside the room. She was dressed in a pair of white satin pyjamas, a teddy bear under her arm. ‘Mrs Gordon says I’ve got to say goodnight. But can’t I stay up a bit longer...? There’s no school tomorrow...’

‘I don’t think so, pumpkin, you’ve got an early start tomorrow...Grandma says she wants to pick you up at seven-thirty.’

Isobel padded further into the room. ‘But I’m not tired.’

‘You will be in the morning if you don’t get a good night’s sleep.’ Lucas reached out an arm and lifted her up onto his knee. She giggled happily and looked across at Penny with wide, sparkling dark eyes.

‘Are you Daddy’s new girlfriend?’

For some reason the question made Penny self-consciously aware of Lucas’s eyes resting on her. ‘No, Isobel. I work for your daddy. I’m helping him tidy up all those files in the office.’

Isobel nodded. ‘I’m going to be a fairy princess in the school play,’ she told Penny seriously.

‘I’m sure you will make a very beautiful fairy princess,’ Penny said. ‘What will you be wearing?’

Isobel frowned. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, a fairy princess usually has a wand, with a star on the top, and sometimes she wears a crown on her head and has a long white dress. Do you think you’ll be wearing something like that?’

‘Maybe...’ Isobel grinned, and Penny noticed she had a gap between her front teeth. ‘Mrs Gordon is going to take me shopping.’

The housekeeper came in at that moment. ‘I won’t take you shopping if you aren’t in bed in five minutes, young lady.’

Isobel squealed dramatically and then kissed her dad on the cheek. ‘Night, Daddy.’

‘Night, pumpkin. I’ll be along soon to tuck you in.’

The child slipped down from his lap and then to Penny’s surprise came around and reached up to kiss her goodnight as well. She smelt of baby lotion and talcum powder, and her hair was glossily soft next to Penny’s skin for a moment before she drew back. ‘Do you think I’ll need wings to be a fairy princess?’ she asked, looking up at her with intently serious eyes.

‘Most definitely,’ Penny said solemnly. ‘All fairy princess have wings.’

Isobel smiled. ‘I can’t wait,’ she said happily. Then with a little wave in her father’s direction she left the room.

‘She’s been talking about nothing but this school play for the last week,’ Mrs Gordon said with an amused smile as she put their appetisers on the table in front of them. ‘I think maybe she’s going to go on the stage when she grows up. She’s a real little actress.’

‘Adorable with it,’ Penny said instantly.

‘Yes, she is.’ The housekeeper smiled at her. ‘Anyway, I’ll leave you to enjoy your meal.’

As the woman left the room Lucas reached to pour some wine in Penny’s glass. ‘How are you finding things at the hotel, Mildred?’ he asked casually.

‘It’s very comfortable.’ She still found it strange answering to that name.

‘I suppose you’ll be looking around for an apartment soon? That’s if you decide to stay on here, of course.’

‘I suppose so. I haven’t really thought about it yet.’ She pretended to be interested in the prawn and avocado starter before her. ‘This looks delicious,’ she said, hoping to change the subject away from her plans

for the future.

‘Yes, Mrs Gordon is very skilled in the kitchen,’ Lucas agreed, before continuing right back with the conversation. ‘There are some new apartment buildings not far from the office, and I’ve heard good reports about them. Apparently they’re well designed. It wouldn’t hurt to go and look at them.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind, Lucas,’ she said off-handedly.

‘They are rental apartments, so it wouldn’t be too big a commitment.’ He smiled at her. ‘Bearing in mind that you’re a free spirit.’

She reached for her wine and took a sip. ‘Maybe I’ll go and take a look next week...if I’ve got time.’

‘I’ll give you an extra long lunch on Monday.’

‘Are you on commission for these apartments?’ she asked him, her eyes sparkling with amusement. ‘You seem very keen for me to look at them.’

‘Just trying to be helpful,’ he said easily. ‘I know it must be difficult for you, settling in to a new job and looking for somewhere to live all at the same time. I think looking around at the accommodation available will give you a better idea of whether you want to stay on here or not.’

His thoughtfulness touched her, made her wish for a moment that she really was intending to stay on as his PA. ‘Thanks, Lucas, I appreciate that.’ She felt so guilty that she couldn’t quite meet his eye as she spoke.

Penny was glad when Mrs Gordon bustled in to clear the table.

‘If you’ll excuse me for a moment, Mildred.’ Lucas pushed his chair back from the table. ‘I’ll just go tuck Isobel in and wish her goodnight.’

‘Yes, of course.’ For a little while Penny was left alone in the room. She toyed with her wine glass, watching the way the candlelight twinkled over the crystal. Her surroundings were so tranquil that it added to the sense of unreality inside her. She shouldn’t be here; she shouldn’t be doing this, a small voice told her sharply.

Maybe she should leave now, just walk away while there was no real harm done. She had merely helped Lucas to tidy his office. Even if she wasn’t the real Mildred, how annoyed could he be about a little unpaid clerical assistance when he was so clearly desperate for staff?

As she made to push her chair away from the table Mrs Gordon came back into the room with their main course. ‘There you are, dear,’ she said, as she placed a plate in front of her with succulent slices of roast beef on it. ‘Lucas will be along in a moment; Isobel is always asleep within two minutes once he’s tucked her up.’

‘Thank you.’ Penny smiled at the woman and realised that walking out wasn’t really an option. It would be incredibly rude after Mrs Gordon had gone to so much trouble. Maybe she should feign illness once Lucas got back to the table? She could have a sudden migraine attack and get him to drop her back at the hotel. At least once she was there she could think a little more clearly about all this. Sitting here accepting Lucas’s hospitality just didn’t feel right.

The housekeeper put down a serving dish of potatoes and vegetables. ‘If you don’t mind my saying so, you remind me somewhat of Lucas’s late wife,’ she said suddenly as she glanced across at her. ‘Kay had the same beautiful blonde hair and green eyes.’

‘Did she?’ Penny was taken aback by the observation. ‘Isobel has such dark hair I would have thought Kay would have been dark also.’

Mrs Gordon shook her head. ‘Isobel is like her father; she has his Spanish blood. And of course Lucas takes after his mother...Isabella. She was a most beautiful woman.’

‘Getting the family history, I hear,’ Lucas said with a grin as he returned to the room.

‘I’m just saying how beautiful your mother was,’ Mrs Gordon continued unabashed. ‘How is Isobel?’

‘Fast asleep, thanks, Mrs Gordon.’

With a satisfied nod the housekeeper left the room.

‘Mrs Gordon could sit an exam on my family and pass with honours,’ Lucas said with a grin as the door closed behind her.

The woman was certainly right about one thing, Penny thought as she glanced across at him. Lucas looked nothing like his father...and maybe he was nothing like him in character either.

‘Would you like more wine?’ Lucas asked, and lifted the bottle towards her glass.

‘No, thank you.’ Hurriedly she declined, and noticed that he put the bottle down without refilling his own glass.

‘I’ll keep a clear head for later,’ he said when he caught her eye.

‘Later?’ She wondered if it was her imagination—or did his voice hold the husky promise of invitation...?

‘Driving you home.’

‘Oh, I see.’ For some reason she found herself blushing. ‘I can take a taxi, Lucas.’

‘I wouldn’t hear of it.’ Lucas waved the offer aside dismissively. ‘I’d like to see you home.’ There was a certain warmth about his tone and in his eyes that sent little darts of awareness rushing through her.

‘So tell me a little more about yourself...Milly. May I call you Milly? It seems somehow to suit you more than Mildred.’

‘Does it?’ She moistened her lips nervously.

‘Yes, it does.’ He smiled.

Their eyes met and held across the table and she felt her heart give a crazy kind of skip.

She wondered what would happen if she told him the truth right now. Would he hate her and throw her out without waiting for an explanation? Or would he patiently listen to what she had to say?

The thought of him hating her was appalling.

‘Tell me what it was like growing up in Barbados,’ Lucas invited lazily.

Hastily she pulled herself together. ‘Much the same as growing up here, I would imagine.’

‘I went to boarding school in England for a good many years,’ Lucas said. ‘It was the place my father was educated and he was determined I should go there as well. So I suppose you could say that I grew up in England.’

‘Were you homesick?’ Penny asked curiously.

‘I got used to it.’ He shrugged. ‘My mother, however, was never happy about it. But my father was a forceful character; he usually got his own way.’

‘I can imagine,’ Penny muttered with icy disdain, then noticed Lucas looking at her quizzically and realised she had probably sounded too vehement. ‘I mean...I can imagine it was difficult for your mother.’

She must have missed you.’ Quickly she tried to soften her tone.

‘Yes, I suppose she did. I was an only child, and my father was away a lot on business.’

Yes, he was in Arbuda, having an affair, Penny thought disdainfully. She felt sorry for Lucas’s mother. Not only had her husband been an overbearing tyrant but he had been unfaithful to her as well. She wondered if Isabella had known.

‘I take it from what Mrs Gordon was saying that your mother is dead now?’

Lucas nodded. ‘She died twelve years ago.’

‘I’m sorry.’ She wondered if Lucas had any idea about what had really gone on in Arbuda.

‘And did you get on with your father?’ she asked him curiously.

‘We had our disagreements...’ He shrugged. ‘But thankfully we patched up our differences before he died. I’m glad of that.’

Which meant that he probably wouldn’t want to hear anything negative about his father now, Penny thought dryly.

‘What about you?’ Lucas asked. ‘Did you have a good relationship with your parents?’

‘Very. But my mother died when I was sixteen and Dad was low for a while after that. Unfortunately he made some bad decisions around that time. Got involved in a business deal with a very dodgy character...a man who had a hidden agenda...and from having a nice comfortable home things started to go downhill. I did what I could to help him, took over the running of the house and tried very hard to sort things out, but it was a difficult situation and it went from bad to worse.’

‘So how is your father now?’ Lucas asked.

‘Financially he never recovered...’ Penny hesitated. ‘But he is still battling on and I’m hoping things will improve for him soon.’

‘It sounds like he’s had a tough time.’ Lucas sounded sympathetic.

‘Yes, and all because he was taken in by a confidence trickster.’ Penny’s eyes shimmered.

‘Have you tried to redress the situation by law?’

‘Oh, yes. Solicitors’ letters have been flying backwards and forwards for years. All that happens is that the bills grow bigger. The debt piles up.’

‘Maybe it’s time he just cut his losses?’ Lucas said quietly.

‘I think he’d rather die than do that...’

‘It’s only money—and at least he has a loving and supportive daughter. That means a lot.’

A loving and supportive daughter who was dining with the enemy, Penny thought guiltily. And, what was worse, she was enjoying dining with the enemy. He seemed very easy to talk to, very charming. But then her mother had probably thought that about Lawrence Darien.

Outside in the hall the grandfather clock struck ten, the chimes echoing in the stillness of the house.

There was really no point sitting here telling Lucas about her father unless she told him the whole truth...and if she did that all hell might break loose. Speaking ill of the dead was a risky business, even under ordinary circumstances. And these were certainly not ordinary circumstances. She should have made her excuses and left ages ago, as she had planned.

‘That was a delicious dinner, but I really should be going.’ She straightened her cutlery on the plate.

‘So soon?’ He frowned. ‘At least have coffee with me in the lounge first.’

Penny shook her head and got hastily to her feet. ‘I’d better not. I didn’t realise it was so late.’

‘You must be tired.’ Lucas also stood up, and walked around towards her. ‘Don’t worry about starting too early in the morning. Now that I’ve found those deeds some of the pressure is off. I might drop them over to Salvador’s house in the morning. That way I could pick you up about eleven, if that’s all right?’

‘Fine.’ The mention of those deeds made her tense up inside.

‘And don’t worry too much about your father, Milly,’ he said softly. ‘I know it’s an old cliché, but if he has his health, really, at the end of the day, that is the most important thing.’

‘You think so?’ For some reason his matter-of-fact statement made her angry, especially as it was spoken in almost the same breath as his mentioning the deeds of her father’s house.

It was easy for him to be so laid back, but what would he say if it was his father in this situation? If it was his father who was going through hell? ‘But money is important, Lucas,’ she said with brittle emphasis. ‘Let’s face it, if it wasn’t you wouldn’t be getting ready to evict some old man from his home.’

For a second Lucas’s eyes narrowed on her face. ‘That’s totally different.’

‘I can’t see that it is.’ Her voice trembled slightly.

‘Hey...’ Lucas reached out and much to her consternation put a hand under her chin, tipping her face up towards his. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Of course I am.’ She swallowed hard.

‘This business in Arbuda is part of my father’s last will and testament. He has requested specifically that I follow it through...’ Lucas trailed off. ‘Anyway, Salvador is looking in to all that for me. I assure you everything is being done decently.’

‘Is it?’ Penny was distracted suddenly as his hand seemed to trail upwards over her face in a butterfly caress.

And suddenly she wasn’t thinking about her father any more. Instead her eyes were locked with his and she could feel small shivers of awareness shooting through her. She felt suddenly breathless with a strange kind of excitement...the kind that made her body tingle and her pulses quicken. His hand traced lightly across her cheekbones, setting her skin on fire, and then trailed through the soft silkiness of her hair.

Penny felt a thrill shooting through her that was so intense it was shocking, and there was a strange magnetic intensity between her body and his. He was standing only a few inches away, and yet she could feel the pull of his body inviting her closer. She wanted to move into his arms so badly that it was a physical effort not to sway closer.

His gaze moved to the softness of her mouth and she imagined she could almost feel his eyes touching her. She moistened her lips nervously as they tingled with the anticipation and the need for him to kiss her.

‘Milly...’ He breathed her name in an undertone.

Except it wasn’t her name...she was here under false pretences. The fact flicked through her mind with lightning speed. She needed to back away from this quickly. Yet she couldn’t seem to make herself. Her brain was logically telling her one thing but her body was saying something quite different, and with much more force.

Then, quite unexpectedly, Lucas was the one to step back. Penny wondered if she had misread the signs, if the chemistry that had flared between them had been all in her mind. She looked up at him

wordlessly, and in the ensuing silence she could hear her heart hammering fiercely against her chest.

‘Milly, I—’ Whatever he had been about to say was interrupted by an almighty clatter coming from outside the room. ‘What on earth was that?’ he muttered in consternation, and hurried out to investigate.

Penny followed him into the hallway. There was the sound of someone moaning in pain and they quickly followed the noise down and into the kitchen. Mrs Gordon was lying on the kitchen floor, her leg twisted at an awkward angle beneath her, cutlery and pots and pans on the tiled floor around her.

‘My God, are you all right?’ Lucas was instantly beside her, his tone laced with deep concern.

‘Yes...yes, I’m okay.’ The woman moved and managed to sit up, but her face was white and her lips quivered as if she might burst into tears at any moment. ‘What a mess,’ she wailed as she looked around her at the floor. ‘I tried to catch hold of the table to break my fall and everything came tumbling down on top of me.’

‘Never mind the mess,’ Lucas said impatiently. ‘The most important thing is you. Do you think you’ve broken anything?’

‘No.’ The housekeeper moved her foot and winced. ‘I can’t believe I was so stupid. I spilt some water on the floor and forgot to mop it up immediately. Then the next thing I knew my legs just went beneath me... So silly...I’m always telling Isobel to be careful when these tiles are wet.’ She flinched as she tried to get up.

‘Maybe you’d better not move,’ Lucas said gently. ‘Where does it hurt?’

‘I’ll be all right.’ With grim determination Mrs Gordon tried to hoist herself up, using the edge of the table.

‘Okay...if you must get up, let me help you.’ Hurriedly Lucas put an arm around her and lifted her to her feet.

‘Thank you.’ She smiled bravely as she leaned against the table. ‘See—I’m fine.’ But as soon as she put her foot down on the ground her face crumpled in agony.

‘We should ring for an ambulance,’ Lucas said firmly.

‘No!’ The woman looked horrified. ‘I don’t want all that fuss.’

‘You need to get to hospital, Mrs Gordon,’ Penny said gently.

‘I’ll be fine...really.’ Even as she was speaking she was trying to gingerly test her foot on the floor again. But she was obviously in excruciating pain.

‘I’ll take you down to Casualty myself,’ Lucas said determinedly. ‘You’ve got to go and get checked out.’ As he spoke Lucas moved to pick up a set of keys that were hanging by the back door. ‘Will you keep an eye on Isobel for me while I’m gone?’ He looked around at Penny and she nodded her head.

‘Of course I will.’

‘Thanks.’ He smiled at her and then, ignoring his housekeeper’s protests, scooped her up as if she were a mere lightweight and carried her towards the door.

Penny hurried to open it for him, and then followed them out through the night to open the passenger door of his car for them as well.

‘All this fuss over a small fall,’ Mrs Gordon said, her voice breaking on a sob. ‘I’ll be all right after a good night’s sleep.’

‘I’ll feel better if you are properly checked over,’ Lucas said soothingly. ‘Please don’t fret, Ethel.’ Gently he tucked her skirt inside the car so that the door wouldn’t catch it.

‘We’ll be back as soon as possible, Milly,’ he said as he strode around to get into the car himself.

‘That’s okay. There’s no hurry.’ Penny stepped back and watched as he started the engine and the car pulled away down the driveway. Only when the lights had faded into the darkness did she return to the house.

CHAPTER FIVE

PENNY wandered back through the hallway and stood listening for any sound from Isobel. But all she could hear was the gentle rhythmic tick of the clock. Obviously the child was still fast asleep. She glanced through the doorway into the dining room, noting the dishes waiting to be cleared from the table. It seemed sensible to start tidying up. At least it would be one less worry for Lucas and Mrs Gordon when they returned from the hospital.

It didn't take long to clear the dining room, and then Penny started on the kitchen, lifting the debris from the floor and stacking the dishwasher before mopping and drying the tiles so that there would be no more accidents. The kitchen was a dream to work in. Every modern convenience was stowed away behind the shiny white units, and it was good to keep busy; it took her mind away from thinking about Lucas and the desire that had flared as soon as he had touched her. He seemed to have a strange power over her senses, a power that was extremely disconcerting.

She remembered how lovely he had been with Mrs Gordon, so gentle and concerned, and even that made her insides turn to gooey emotion. Ferociously she scrubbed at the kitchen counters until they gleamed. She wouldn't give those thoughts any space, she told herself angrily. Instead she would dwell on why she was here...and also poor Mrs Gordon. The woman had looked extremely shaken by that fall; she hoped that she hadn't broken anything.

The kitchen done, Penny meandered back into the hall. It seemed strange being alone in this house. She supposed she really should be making the most of the situation by going into the office and searching for those papers, but somehow it seemed a little too underhanded when Lucas was at a hospital on a mission of mercy.

On the other hand, the sooner she found those papers the sooner she could put all this behind her and get on with her own life. Penny paused by the door to the office. She had just reached out and turned the handle when a shrill ringing filled the silence. For a moment she imagined it was an alarm, then she realised that it was the phone. With a wry grin at her foolish imagination she hurried inside to answer it.

'Hi, it's me.' Lucas's voice sounded velvety-warm down the phone.

'Hi, how's Mrs Gordon?'

'Well, the good news is that she hasn't broken her ankle. The bad news is that there is a problem with her hip and they want to keep her in for observation.'

'Oh, no! The poor woman.'

'Yes, she's totally spooked. Hates hospitals. Anyway, I've rung her sister and she's on her way. But I think I'd better hang around until she arrives.'

'That's okay, Lucas. I'll just wait for you.'

'The thing is I might not be home for another couple of hours, and you must be exhausted. I was thinking it might be sensible if you bunk down in the spare bedroom. It's already made up.'

'I'm not that tired, Lucas,' she said quickly. 'I can wait up for you.'

'But then you'll have to get a taxi back to the hotel because I can't leave Isobel alone,' Lucas said calmly. 'Take the spare bedroom; it's the last door on the right upstairs. At least that way you'll get some

sleep. Just make yourself at home.'

The phone went dead before she could argue further. Penny sat down on the edge of the office desk and glanced over at the filing cabinets. By the sounds of things she had a good few hours to go through them.

She stood up and opened the first drawer. *Make yourself at home...* Lucas's words echoed in her mind as she stared down at the papers inside. They had a warm ring to them and from nowhere she felt a fierce thrust of guilt.

'Damn it all,' she muttered vehemently, and slammed the drawer shut again. Then she turned and left the room. Somehow she didn't have the heart to go rummaging through files now.

Having these attacks of conscience wasn't helping her father, she told herself angrily as she went upstairs. She would have to get on with searching for those papers first thing tomorrow. It was either that or leave.

She paused by an open door halfway along the landing. It was Isobel's room. A small night lamp was on, highlighting the soft pink walls and the pink and white patchwork quilt that covered the bed. Penny crept in to check on the little girl. She was fast asleep, the covers thrown back slightly. Penny tucked them in around her and, noticing her teddy bear had slipped down between the bed and the side table, placed it in next to her again.

Poor little mite, she thought, watching over her for a moment. It couldn't be easy growing up without her mum. Quietly she slipped back out into the corridor.

The room next door was obviously Mrs Gordon's, judging by the voluminous purple dress hanging on the side of the wardrobe.

Lucas's room was across from that. She knew it was his room because it was so typically masculine. There was an enormous bed, with a pale grey cover on it, a computer in one corner with a stack of books sitting next to it, and a trouser press with a pair of jeans hanging over it.

She walked further on and opened the door at the end of the corridor. It was decorated in shades of lilac and white, with white wicker furniture, and had a country-fresh feel about it. The bed looked extremely inviting. Maybe she would take up Lucas's offer and bunk down for the night. At least that way she could get up early in the morning and get on with looking through those files. Closing the door behind her, she stripped off and slipped beneath the cool sheets.

As soon as her head hit the pillow she was asleep.

Her dreams that night were as troubled as her thoughts had been by day. One moment she was telling Lucas the truth...the next she was creeping out of the house, the deeds to her father's house tucked into her handbag. Stealing the papers had never been her intention, and she woke up in a cold panic, her heart thudding with fear.

The room was in pitch darkness, and for a few moments she couldn't remember where she was. There was a strange sound in the darkness, like a distant wailing. It took a moment for her to remember that she was at Lucas's house and that the noise was probably Isobel crying. Swiftly she threw back the covers, pulled on her trousers, buttoned up her top and hurried along to the child's room.

The little girl was sitting on the edge of her bed, sobbing uncontrollably.

'What's the matter, darling?' Penny said soothingly as she went across to her.

'Want my daddy.'

'Daddy will be here soon. He had to take Mrs Gordon to the doctor because she had a sore leg.' Penny sat down beside her and put an arm around her. 'But it's nothing to worry about.'

Isobel looked up at her, her eyes brimming with tears. 'Why does Mrs Gordon have a sore leg?'

‘Because she slipped on the kitchen floor.’ Penny pulled back the bed covers. ‘But she’ll be better soon, and Daddy will be home. Now, why don’t you get back into bed and try and get some sleep? You’re going out with your grandma in the morning, aren’t you?’

Isobel nodded, but made no move to get into the bed. ‘Will Mrs Gordon have to go to heaven, like Mummy?’ A huge tear spilled down her cheek.

‘Oh, no, darling.’ Penny’s heart went out to the little girl and she wrapped her arms around her and held her tight. ‘Mrs Gordon will be just fine.’

‘Promise?’ Isobel looked up at her, and when Penny nodded she snuggled happily back into her arms. Penny stroked the dark hair soothingly and rocked her for a few moments. It felt strangely comforting, holding the warmth of the child close in her arms.

‘Now, let’s have no more tears,’ she whispered. ‘There’s nothing to be scared about.’

‘There might be a bogeyman under the bed,’ Isobel murmured solemnly. ‘I’d be scared of that.’

‘There’s no such thing as bogeymen.’

‘Sure?’ Isobel looked up at her again with big wide eyes.

Penny grinned. ‘I’m positive.’

Isobel cuddled in against her again.

‘You really should be getting back to sleep. It must be very late...’ Penny glanced up as a movement in the doorway caught her eye. Lucas was standing there watching them. He smiled at Penny as their eyes met.

‘How long have you been there?’ she asked in surprise.

‘A few minutes. I’ve just got back from the hospital.’

Isobel looked up as she heard her father’s voice. ‘Daddy!’ she squealed with delight, and flung herself off the bed to go and run into his arms.

‘You should be in bed and asleep, young lady. It’s three in the morning,’ he said as he swung her up into his arms.

‘I had a bad dream and I woke up. I thought there was a bogeyman under the bed.’

‘As Milly said, there’s no such thing as bogeymen,’ Lucas told her gently. ‘So back to bed with you.’

Penny moved out of the way as he carried the child back to her bed. She watched as he tucked her up.

‘Sweet dreams, pumpkin,’ he said.

‘Night, Daddy,’ Isobel snuggled down contentedly. ‘Night, Milly.’

‘Night, sweetheart.’ Penny smiled.

Isobel looked as if she was fighting to keep her eyes open as they turned and left the room.

‘So how is Mrs Gordon?’ Penny asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

‘Not good.’ Lucas pulled the door closed behind them. ‘Apparently she has been having a lot of pain in her hip for the last few months. But she’s been too scared to go and see a doctor. This fall has just aggravated the problem further.’

‘Poor woman.’ Penny’s face creased in concern. ‘What do they think is wrong?’

‘One of the doctors said it looked from the X-ray as if there was a problem with the hip joint which could have been caused by arthritis.’ Lucas shrugged. ‘But we’ll know more tomorrow, when the consultant sees her.’

His eyes flicked down over her body. ‘Did you get dressed in a hurry?’ he asked with a grin.

She followed his eyes down and noticed her top was buttoned crookedly. Suddenly she was extremely conscious of her untidy appearance. Her blonde hair was tousled and loose around her shoulders, she was wearing no make-up and her clothes weren’t even on correctly. ‘I must look a mess...’ Hurriedly she tried to rebutton her top. ‘I was in bed asleep when I heard Isobel crying.’

‘I don’t think you could ever look a mess, Milly,’ he said huskily. ‘On the contrary, you are a very beautiful woman.’

The compliment and the way he was looking at her made her temperature suddenly shoot up. ‘Thank you...I wasn’t fishing for compliments.’

‘I know that.’ He noted that she was buttoning her top up crookedly again. ‘Do you want a hand with that?’ There was a hint of dry amusement in the darkness of his eyes.

‘No, thank you.’ She dropped her hands to her sides; they were far too unsteady to sort the problem out now. ‘Anyway, it’s late...I suppose we should turn in.’

‘I suppose we should.’

He made no attempt to move away and neither did she; they just stood there looking at each other. To her consternation she could feel an intimate sense of awareness spiralling between them, just as it had earlier.

‘Thanks for looking after Isobel for me tonight. You were great with her,’ he said softly.

‘It wasn’t difficult. She’s a lovely child.’ She swallowed hard and tried to wrench her eyes away from the mesmerising force of his, but she couldn’t. ‘Anyway...you must be tired; it’s been a long day.’ She tried again to be strong and sensible and move away. The words sounded good, yet her body refused to put them into action.

‘I’m not in the slightest bit tired,’ he murmured. He reached out and smoothed a stray strand of her hair away from her face. The gentle touch of his hand against her skin sent a shivery erotic sensation flooding through her.

‘Neither am I,’ she whispered shakily.

‘I know...’ His eyes raked over her face, lingering on her lips. ‘There is a certain chemistry between us...isn’t there?’

It was more of a statement than a question, so she made no reply.

‘And I’ve been wondering what to do about it ever since we were interrupted at this point earlier today.’

‘Have you...?’ She found herself swaying a little closer. What would it be like to kiss him? she wondered. Her heart thundered in her ears as if she had been running.

‘And I’ve wondered how politically correct it would be to do this...’ He bent closer and his lips connected with hers in a butterfly caress that set off an explosion of passionate sensation inside her. ‘I keep trying to convince myself that this isn’t a good idea,’ he murmured, and he pulled back fractionally, his eyes on her lips, his breath soft against her skin. ‘I keep telling myself that you work for me, and mixing business with pleasure can cause all kinds of complications...’ As he spoke he brushed his lips lightly against hers again, in a feather-light provocative way that made her ache for so much more.

‘You’re right...’ she murmured unsteadily. ‘All kinds of complications...’ And in more ways than one, she added silently, trying to make herself pull back from the situation. She was here under false pretences,

for a start, so an affair of the heart was out of the question, and as she had never been a person who indulged in casual sex, it was time to move away now. Her mind registered the command but still she didn't move. She felt spellbound by his closeness.

'But then I thought...what the hell...?' As Lucas was speaking he traced the line of her mouth with one forefinger, sending shivery sensations of pure hunger racing through her. 'Maybe this is a risk worth taking...'

The rasping deep tones of his voice seemed to inflame her senses even more. 'Maybe it is...' she found herself agreeing softly.

He moved even closer then, lacing both hands through the softness of her hair, and held her in a possessive way as he kissed her again. Her resistance to him crumbled totally and this time she kissed him back, fire racing through her veins, adrenalin pumping. The kiss deepened and suddenly nothing mattered except the urgent demands of her body.

Penny wasn't even able to think straight any more. Everything was just a wild blur of complete and utter longing.

She felt his hands caressing up over her body, finding the aroused hard thrust of her naked breast through the cotton material of her blouse. The sensation of his fingers teasing her erect nipple through the light clothing was unbearably erotic. His tongue invaded the softness of her mouth, his kisses becoming more and more heated and demanding.

She stood on tiptoe, responding to him with equal passion, pressing closer against him.

'I've been wondering what this would feel like since the first moment you walked into my office,' he murmured.

'So have I,' she admitted shakily.

He smiled, and then, taking hold of her hand, he led her into his bedroom.

Penny's heart was thundering so heavily against her chest that it was like a wild animal trying to escape. The rational side of her brain told her that this was a mistake. But the voice of reason was a mere whisper against the hurricane force of her need for him.

He turned on the bedside lamp and it threw the room into a shadowy gold light.

Penny watched as he tore off his shirt. She noticed the way his muscles rippled with strength and vitality under the honey bronze of his skin, and she felt her stomach muscles contract into sharp knots of desire. She sat down on the edge of the bed, wondering if this was all a dream...Maybe she hadn't really woken up?

He reached for the buckle on his trousers and unfastened it. She had never really thought that a man's body was beautiful before...but his was. It was sheer perfection. From the broad, powerful shoulders to the narrow hips, he had the sort of body that could have belonged to an athlete, honed and tuned and in the peak of physical condition.

He glanced over at her, caught her watching him and grinned. Then he approached the bed, with a look of purpose in the dark eyes that made her heart beat even faster.

'Lucas, are we doing the right thing...?' she murmured, a note of panic in her voice.

He smiled and then reached out and unbuttoned her blouse, revealing the upward tilt of her breasts, the erect nipples. 'Your body seems to think so...and so does mine.'

As if to prove the point his fingers moved over her womanly curves and she closed her eyes as a burning wave of pleasure shot through her. She leaned back against the satin covers of the bed and helped him to remove the rest of her clothing, her fingers as frantic and feverish for him as his were for her.

CHAPTER SIX

WHEN Penny woke up the room was lit by a shadowy silver light cast from the outside landing. At some point Lucas must have switched off the bedside lamp, but Penny didn't remember that. All she remembered was the wild passion, the heat of his kisses, and the feel of his hands as they took her to heights she had never reached before. No one had ever made her feel like that before...not even Nick, and she had been deeply in love with him. The knowledge was deeply perturbing. Last night had been a mistake. Lucas Darien was the enemy.

She turned her head and looked across at him. He was fast asleep, lying on his side facing her. The covers had slipped from his shoulders, revealing the power of his body. Just looking at him made her stomach dip, as if she was on a swing and someone had pushed her too high, too hard. Her eyes drifted over the contours of his face, taking the opportunity to study him in sleep. His features were classically perfect: a strong, chiselled jawline, high cheekbones and a wide forehead. She noticed the length of his dark lashes, the sensual, soft curve of his mouth. And suddenly she wanted to reach out and touch him, cuddle into the protective curve of those arms, press her lips against his. She didn't want Lucas to be the enemy...she really didn't.

As if he sensed her watching him, he suddenly opened his eyes and their gaze connected.

He smiled lazily at her and her heart dipped with longing. 'Good morning.'

'Morning,' she murmured, thinking how formal and polite they sounded after a night of such intimacy.

'What time is it?'

'I don't know.' Trying to keep the covers over her nakedness, she stretched out her arm to peer at her watch. 'Five-thirty...I think.'

'Plenty of time, then.'

'Plenty of time for what?'

He gave a low laugh and rolled over so that he was pinning her against the mattress. 'What do you think?' he murmured playfully.

The sudden contact of his body against hers made her insides dissolve in longing. Then he kissed her, a long, lingering, warm kiss that sent her senses reeling into further chaos.

The feelings inside her were intensely conflicting. One part of her was telling her that this was wrong... that she was losing sight of the truth and her real reason for being here. The other part of her was recklessly trying to ignore all those warnings because she wanted him so much. It was a whole new experience for Penny; she had never had to fight with herself like this before—she had always been perfectly in control of her emotions.

'Being here with you like this is probably a big mistake,' she whispered, but at the same time she was running her fingers through the soft darkness of his hair almost wondrously, loving the texture of it against her hands, loving the freedom of being able to stroke him, touch him.

'Why is that?' he asked lazily, peppering her forehead and her cheeks and then the sides of her throat with kisses.

She hadn't even realised she had spoken aloud until he asked. 'I suppose for the same reasons you were expounding last night.' She murmured the excuse almost off-handedly, not wanting to think too deeply about anything except what he was doing to her.

Maybe it was the strange half-light of the room, or just the closeness of his naked body, but she had totally lost all inhibitions. She arched her back as his lips moved lower down to the hollow of her chest. Her body was clamouring wildly for him to touch her more intimately. She ached to feel his mouth against her breasts.

'Mmm...but after last night I think those worries have evaporated...What we shared was far too pleasurable to ever be classed as a mistake...' His hands travelled up over the curve of her hips, smoothing into her waist and then higher.

'Definitely,' she murmured breathlessly as his fingers moved over her breast, closing over the rosy hard peak of her desire. 'After all...' She gasped a little as his mouth followed the path of his hands. 'This is just sex—' She broke off as he pulled away from her slightly. 'What's the matter?' she asked throatily.

His dark eyes locked with hers in amusement. 'Nothing...I just didn't realise you were so modern in your approach to lovemaking.'

She felt herself colouring up with a different kind of heat now. The ironic thing was that she was anything but modern in her approach to lovemaking...she had never indulged in a one-night stand before in her life, had always needed to feel deeply involved with a man before going to bed with him. But she was enough of a realist to know that kind of a relationship was out of the question between them.

How could this ever be anything other than just a casual liaison when she had told him so many lies? And apart from that he was the one man in the world she should definitely not have taken to bed. She was betraying her father with every minute she was in his arms. She was sleeping with the enemy. The hard, cold facts thumped through her mind in unrelenting waves of condemnation.

There would never be a future for them as a couple.

'I just meant that there need be no recriminations between us tomorrow...' she murmured shakily, trying not to care too deeply. If all she could have of him was now then she would take what she could.

'Definitely no recriminations,' he agreed. His eyes moved over her heated countenance, taking in the vulnerable light in her green-gold eyes and the soft curve of her lips. He stroked his hand soothingly across her cheekbones, feeling the heat of her skin, and then threaded his hands through the silky cloud of her hair that was spread across the pillows around her. 'I learnt long ago not to worry about what might happen in the future...now is all that matters.'

'And this is just a bit of fun. Why shouldn't we enjoy ourselves...?' she whispered as his lips trailed up the column of her neck to the sensitive hollow of her throat.

'Why not, indeed?' he agreed lazily, moving further up to nibble on her ear.

Desperately she was trying to formulate sensible thoughts, whilst at the same time her body was driving her to new heights of need.

He found her lips and kissed her in a slow, intense way that drugged her senses even more. Then he pulled her closer and their bodies merged as one in a powerful, intoxicating rhythm.

Lucas was a masterful lover, totally skilled at turning a woman on, and she revelled in the warmth and passion of his body, meeting fire with fire. As she drowned in the heady experience the real world seemed to blur into insignificance. Nothing else mattered except here and now. Again and again he brought her to the brink of ecstasy, controlling her, playing with her until she was almost begging for release and total fulfilment. Then, just when she thought she couldn't wait any longer, he tipped her over the edge onto a rollercoaster of thunderous, joyful fulfilment.

She clung to him breathlessly afterwards. Neither of them spoke. There seemed no need for words; the way he cradled her close and stroked her hair seemed words enough.

Contentedly she drifted to sleep, secure in the powerful circle of his arms.

When Penny next opened her eyes, she felt warm and lazily content; she reached out across the bed, searching for Lucas, wanting to snuggle back into his arms, but her hands found only the cool empty space in the bed next to her. She sat up, brushing the weight of her hair back from her face as she glanced around. 'Lucas?'

There was no reply. She was alone in the room. Penny lay back against the pillows and looked at her watch. It was almost nine-thirty! She couldn't believe she had slept so late. Or maybe she could after the activity of the night... Her lips curved in a smile. Lucas had been the most incredible lover. Just thinking about what he had done to her made her insides melt all over again... made her want to do it all over again.

Sunlight was creeping into the room through a chink in the curtains. She watched the way it played over the satin bedcovers and felt warm and dreamy. She wished Lucas was here with her now—in fact she wished that every night could be spent like last night, wrapped in his arms...

Suddenly her thoughts froze as a swift surge of reality brutally attacked the wistful feelings inside her. She was being crazy. Sleeping with Lucas had been a one-off event. It could never happen again. Okay, last night had been wildly exciting and deeply satisfying, but it had also been incredibly reckless. She was here to help her father and there was no escaping that fact. And, what was more, if she didn't hurry and get out of here she would be exposed as a fraud by the real Mildred Bancroft—and she was damned sure Lucas wouldn't want to take her into his arms when that happened. He'd be livid and she couldn't honestly blame him.

Angry with herself for caring, she swung her legs out of bed and headed for the *en suite* bathroom. Her first loyalty had to be to her father.

What she needed to do today was find those papers, put them somewhere Lucas wouldn't think of looking for them, and then leave post haste. She couldn't afford to think about Lucas Darien on a personal level.

Penny stepped under the heavy jet of the shower and turned her face up towards the razor-sharp spray in an attempt to clear her mind of the confused warmth of last night. It had just been a pleasurable interlude, nothing more, she reassured herself sternly.

She felt a little better once she had showered and dressed. She continued to give herself a severe pep talk as she dried her hair, and by the time she left Lucas's bedroom had almost managed to convince herself that her priorities were back in order. Then she walked downstairs into the kitchen, her eyes connected with Lucas's and all her stern words counted for nothing.

'Good morning.' He smiled at her and she felt as if someone had pushed her into orbit, leaving her stomach behind.

'Morning.' She gave him the briefest of smiles and then wrenched her eyes away from his, trying very hard not to remember how they had wished each other good morning earlier... She was glad that they weren't alone in the room; Isobel was sitting at the breakfast bar, a glass of milk in front of her.

'How are you this morning, Isobel?' she asked, turning her attention to the child.

Isobel barely looked up. 'I'm okay,' she murmured.

'I'm making Isobel's favourite breakfast of pancakes,' Lucas said with a smile. 'Would you like some?'

'No, thank you. I never really eat much breakfast.'

'They won't be as good as Mrs Gordon makes anyway,' Isobel told her.

‘Of course they will. Bet I make the best pancakes you’ve ever tasted,’ Lucas said. ‘Go on, try some, Milly. You must be hungry.’

Hidden in the softly spoken words was the husky reminder of why she should be hungry.

‘No, I’m fine—really.’ Penny hoped her cheeks hadn’t just flared with colour. ‘But I’ll make some tea, if you don’t mind.’ Without waiting for him to reply she headed over for the kettle. She’d just have a quick drink and get back to the office. A cosy breakfast was definitely not what she needed right now.

‘That would be great,’ Lucas said cheerfully. ‘But I’ll have coffee.’

‘Fine.’ She busied herself opening cupboard doors to find cups.

Lucas poured some batter into a pan and the gentle sizzle of cooking filled the air. Surprisingly he looked quite at home in front of the stove, she thought as she glanced over at him. He was dressed in casual faded blue jeans and a blue T-shirt, and he had a teatowel strung over one shoulder, as if he spent most mornings whipping up some gastronomic delight. As Penny watched he scooped up the edges of the pancake and then flipped it over expertly.

‘Mrs Gordon would be most impressed,’ she remarked, and grinned over at Isobel, expecting her to smile back.

But Isobel was sitting at the breakfast bar looking totally unlike her usual sunny-natured self. She was resting her chin in her hands, a look of total dejection on her young face.

Penny looked questioningly over at Lucas and he shook his head.

‘Isobel’s grandma has had to cancel their outing today,’ he explained in a light tone. ‘She’s a little disappointed.’

‘Oh, dear.’ Penny glanced back at Isobel. ‘A little disappointed’ was obviously the understatement of the year.

‘Gran was going to take me to the beach,’ Isobel said in a low tone.

And, judging by the pretty yellow pedal-pushers and matching top, she had been all ready to go when the news came. There was even a beach bag on the floor beside her, packed with a towel and her bucket and spade.

‘That’s a shame,’ Penny said sympathetically. ‘Maybe she’ll take you another day instead.’

‘Maybe...but she isn’t feeling very well.’ Isobel frowned, her young face suddenly creased with concern. ‘I hope she doesn’t have to go into hospital like Mrs Gordon.’

‘I don’t think she will, honey,’ Lucas said quickly. ‘Now, do me a favour—will you go outside and call Flint in?’

‘Flint isn’t allowed in the kitchen. Mrs Gordon says so,’ the child told him solemnly.

‘Well, we will make an exception today, as it is special circumstances,’ Lucas said easily.

‘Okay, Daddy.’ The child slipped down off the high stool and ran out of the back door. A few seconds later they could hear her calling for the dog.

‘That’s better—thought we could do with a minute on our own.’ Lucas smiled. He put the teatowel down and switched the cooker off, and in the ensuing silence Penny could feel her heart drumming erratically against her chest as he crossed purposefully towards her.

He looked so handsome and sure of himself, and suddenly she wasn’t sure of anything any more... except the fact that all her strong words were like dust in the wind as soon as he came close.

He smiled at her. 'So, how are you feeling this morning?'

'Fine.' Vivid memories from last night flitted disturbingly through her mind as their eyes connected. His hands caressing over her waist and then sliding upwards towards her breast...his mouth hot and deeply possessive against her skin. 'Absolutely fine,' she reiterated brightly, trying to ignore the recollections. How did he manage to look so devastatingly handsome in just blue jeans and an open necked T-shirt? she wondered distractedly. But then Lucas would probably look good dressed in sackcloth, she thought, trying to switch her mind away from the dangerous attraction she felt for him.

'It's a pity Isobel's outing has had to be cancelled,' she said, trying desperately to keep her mind on more sensible things.

'Yes...it is.' He seemed to be studying her very intently; his eyes were moving over her face in a way that sent tingles of pure sensual awareness trickling through her.

Just the way he was looking at her made her want to forget everything and melt into his arms again; the need was like a raw ache inside her. With difficulty she made herself step back from him and forced herself to concentrate on Isobel. 'She seemed very disappointed.'

For a moment she thought he wasn't going to follow her lead, thought he was going to switch the subject back to what had happened between them last night again, but after a brief hesitation he took up the conversation. 'Yes, and unfortunately Pam is cancelling more and more frequently these days.'

'Is her health very bad?'

Lucas shook his head. 'Quite the contrary; she's in wonderful health. Pam's problem is that she has got a new boyfriend who is half her age and apparently she hasn't told him that she is a grandma. She's frightened it might put him off her.'

'I see.' Penny pulled a face. 'He wouldn't be a very nice person if a little thing like that put him off her. Grandmas are getting younger and younger these days anyway.'

'That's exactly what I told her, but she is completely besotted with him and doesn't want to take any risks with the relationship. So I'm afraid Isobel will have to take a back seat for the time being.' Lucas shrugged. 'That's her prerogative. And I wouldn't mind so much if she didn't keep letting Isobel down. She rings her up and makes promises and then at the last minute cancels them because he's arrived. You can't do that with young children; they don't understand. I've had to lie and tell Isobel she isn't well...and I don't like doing that.'

'It's a difficult situation, but you are right—you shouldn't make promises to children unless you are prepared to keep them.' Penny agreed completely. 'I'm surprised Isobel's grandma isn't more sensitive towards her. You'd think losing her daughter would make her granddaughter extra special.'

'You'd think so, wouldn't you?' Lucas agreed dryly.

'Maybe it's the grief of losing her daughter that has made her like that?' Penny suggested lightly. 'Grief can affect people in very different ways, you know.'

'Maybe.' Lucas smiled at her.

'What are you smiling at?' she asked curiously.

'You.' Lucas took a step closer to her, a gleam of humour in his dark eyes. 'You like to see the good in people, don't you?'

'I don't know...do I?' Her heart was starting to thump a heavy and irregular beat again.

'I think so.' To her consternation he suddenly reached out and pulled her into his arms. 'You have some very lovely traits.'

Penny wanted to pull away from him, but she couldn't. The merest touch of his body against hers made her feel weak with longing. She didn't know if she did see the good in people...all she knew was that she wanted to forget that he was her father's enemy and see the good in him.

He stroked the side of her face lightly with his fingers. 'And while we have this moment let me just tell you that last night was wonderful,' he murmured huskily.

Suddenly she didn't know if she could go on with her charade a moment longer. It was burning her away inside. 'Lucas, we need to talk—' She didn't know what she had been going to say, but whatever it was it was curtailed as the back door opened and Isobel came back in, with Flint skipping by her feet.

Lucas stepped back from Penny immediately, and then bent to stroke Flint as the dog jumped up at him, wagging his tail.

'Look what I've got,' Isobel said, holding out a bunch of daisies in each hand. 'One is for Mrs Gordon and one for Grandma...and...' With difficulty she separated the bunch and held out a few blooms for Penny. 'These are for you.'

'They are lovely, Isobel,' Penny said, touched at the child's consideration. 'Thank you—it's a beautiful thought.' She took the daisies from her and put them to her nose. They had a peppery sweet smell.

'Daddy buys flowers for people sometimes,' Isobel said solemnly. 'He got roses for Emma.'

Penny wondered who Emma was...Some girlfriend, probably; in the language of flowers roses were for love. Was Lucas in love with someone else? She remembered Shauna telling her that he was cut up about a relationship that had just ended. Maybe he still was...maybe last night when he had been making love to her he had been wishing that he was with Emma. She was surprised to feel a sudden fierce surge of jealousy at the thought. The emotion shocked her. She had never been a jealous person and she had no right to feel that emotion now. Lucas could see whoever he wanted...send roses to whomever he wanted...it was none of her business.

'Let's put these flowers in water so they will stay fresh,' Penny said, turning her mind away from Lucas and his dalliances. He probably bought roses for lots of women...probably had a different girlfriend falling at his feet every week.

'There are jam jars under the sink,' Isobel offered helpfully.

Penny went to get them out. The white flowers made charming posies in the jars. Penny lined them up on the kitchen window ledge and then returned to making Lucas some coffee and herself a cup of tea.

'Do you think Grandma might come and take me to the beach later today?' Isobel asked hopefully as she sat back at the breakfast bar.

'I don't think so, pumpkin.' Lucas put the plate of pancakes down in front of her.

'Oh.' Isobel stared at the plate of food in front of her dejectedly.

'Would you like maple syrup or lemon and sugar to go with those?' Lucas asked.

'Maple syrup, please. Do you think Gran will take me to the beach next week?'

'I don't know. I wouldn't bank on it, Issy.'

Isobel bit down on her bottom lip.

'Have you heard any news about Mrs Gordon?' Penny asked, changing the subject as she put Lucas's coffee down in front of him.

'Thanks, Milly. Yes—I rang this morning. She had a comfortable night and she is waiting for the specialist report this afternoon. Her sister is with her.'

‘Can we go and see her, Daddy?’ Isobel asked. ‘I want to give her my flowers.’

‘Not today, Issy. Mrs Gordon needs to have some rest.’

‘Will Mrs Gordon still be able to take me shopping for my fairy outfit tomorrow after school?’ Isobel asked suddenly.

‘I don’t think so, Isobel. I think you’ll have to make do with my help for that shopping trip.’

Isobel looked shocked. ‘Don’t be silly, Daddy. You won’t know what to buy. That’s girls’ stuff.’

‘I think I might know a bit about what the more fashionable fairies will be wearing this season.’ Lucas grinned. ‘You can count on me.’

Penny laughed at the absurdity of the statement, but Isobel didn’t look amused or impressed. ‘You won’t know anything! Everyone else will have the right clothes but I won’t! Gina Fredrick will make fun of me and everyone will laugh.’

‘Oh, come on, Isobel, you are blowing this thing out of proportion. It’s a school play and you are six years of age. It doesn’t really matter what you wear. All you need is a frilly frock and a wand; nobody is going to laugh at you.’

‘Yes, they will—Gina Fredrick will.’ Isobel suddenly looked as if she was going to cry. ‘Gina won’t be wearing a frilly dress. Her mummy takes her shopping all the time and she always looks good.’

‘You always look good.’

‘No, I don’t. I had the wrong shoes for our school walking trip last Tuesday. Gina said they were old-fashioned.’ Suddenly Isobel pushed her chair back from the breakfast bar and ran out of the room.

Lucas grimaced. ‘Sorry about this, Milly. I think Isobel has had one disappointment too many for one day.’

‘It’s understandable,’ Penny said lightly. ‘But I don’t think you should have told her that it doesn’t matter what she wears for her big event. Even at the age of six a girl knows that’s not true.’

Lucas raked a hand distractedly through his hair. ‘It’s a school play, Milly...’

‘Even so, it’s important that Isobel feels she is fitting in with her contemporaries. I remember when I went to school how important it was for me to fit in, and I think the pressures on children are even worse now.’

‘I suppose you are right.’ He shrugged. ‘But, hell, if she is worried like this at the age of six, what the heck will she be like when she becomes a teenager?’

Penny’s heart went out to him; it couldn’t be easy bringing up his daughter on his own. ‘If you want, I’ll take her shopping tomorrow.’ She hadn’t even realised she was going to make the offer until the words were out.

‘Would you?’ Lucas looked surprised—as well he might. She felt pretty surprised herself. ‘That would be very kind of you, Milly. I’d really appreciate it.’

What the heck was she doing? Penny wondered dazedly. This was a real grey area. All right, she sympathised with Lucas’s plight—being a one-parent family was not easy, and little Isobel’s dejected face had tugged at her heartstrings; at the tender age of six she was obviously conscious of not having a mother, like the other girls in the class—but under the circumstances she couldn’t afford to get involved here. This wasn’t her problem. And yet...

‘You really don’t mind?’ Lucas checked.

What if Mildred Bancroft turned up tomorrow? Penny's inner voice asked sternly. What then? Not only would she be in deep trouble, but Isobel would be let down yet again by another adult in her life. She should be concentrating on hiding those papers for her father and getting out of here—nothing else.

Penny glanced over at the doorway and saw Isobel's face peeping in; she had obviously heard Penny's offer and was waiting expectantly for her answer.

Penny took a deep breath. 'No, I don't mind,' she said gently. And, strangely enough, she really didn't. What that meant, she didn't know. At this point in time she didn't want to analyse anything too deeply.

She heard Isobel give a whoop of joy and then the child came hurtling through the door to fling herself at Penny. 'Are you really going to come shopping with me?' she asked excitedly.

'Yes, Isobel. I'll take you tomorrow.' If she'd had any reservations about what she was doing they seemed to evaporate as the little girl climbed up on the stool beside her and flung her arms around her.

'Thank you...thank you,' she squealed excitedly.

'That's okay.' Penny felt quite overwhelmed by the child's response. After all, under different circumstances she wouldn't have thought twice about helping out.

'My dress is going to be far better than Gina Fredrick's now,' Isobel said with triumph.

'Well, I hope so.' Penny laughed. Over Isobel's shoulder her eyes connected with Lucas's. He smiled at her and she felt her heart dip, as if someone had opened a trap door and she had fallen through it.

She hoped he wasn't getting the wrong idea. All right, she liked his daughter, and wanted to help out, but she didn't want him to think that she was harbouring any serious thoughts about the nature of their relationship.

As the child pulled away Penny tried to get into a more businesslike frame of mind. She glanced at her watch. 'I could do with going back to my hotel for a change of clothes before we start work today, Lucas. I'll ring for a taxi—'

'I'll bring you down.' Lucas waved a hand as she started to object. 'I've got to go out anyway. I want to drop those papers at Salvador's house. Get him to check them out.'

Just thinking about those deeds nestling in Lucas's filing cabinet brought a sharp taste of reality into Penny's mouth.

'Tell you what—we'll have lunch at the Smugglers' Inn and a walk along the beach while we are out,' Lucas continued, and smiled at Isobel. 'That way you can try out your bucket and spade after all.'

Isobel gave another whoop of delight that set Flint barking excitedly.

'Maybe you could give me a key for the house, Lucas,' Penny suggested tentatively over the noise. 'That way I can make my own way back here from the hotel after I've changed, and get on with finding the other documents you need.'

'Time enough for work later this afternoon,' Lucas said easily. 'Have lunch with us, Milly.'

Penny's heart thumped uneasily. Lunch sounded incredibly tempting. But she couldn't afford to relax; her ultimate goal had to be to find those papers. 'You really need those other papers, Lucas, and—'

'The other papers can wait a few more hours,' Lucas said, finishing his coffee.

She supposed he could afford to take a more relaxed view of things now he had the deeds to her father's property safely in his possession, Penny thought wryly. If only she had found them first. She could have been out of here before dinner last night and safely at the airport by now.

‘So, what do you say? Will you have lunch with us?’

‘Well, I...’

‘Please come, Milly,’ Isobel entreated, her eyes wide with excitement.

Penny glanced from the child back over at Lucas. ‘You are on a time limit to find those papers,’ she reminded him shakily, trying not to weaken but to think sensibly.

‘I might not need them anyway. It will all depend on what Salvador tells me once he has gone through this other paperwork.’

‘I see...’ In which case her chance for helping her father might have passed, and it might be time to just cut her losses and book herself on the next flight back to Arbuda to help her father pack up his house.

She glanced from Isobel’s earnest face to Lucas, who was patiently waiting for her to answer him. And suddenly the thought of leaving here was unbearable. She’d give herself two more days, she decided. And in that time she could see what the developments were with Lucas’s solicitor and she could take Isobel shopping.

‘Lunch sounds great,’ she said decisively. ‘I’d love to join you.’

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS one of those halcyon days that came so often in the Caribbean. Clear blue skies and sizzling temperatures, with just a little edge of a cooling breeze from the trade winds. It was perfect—or rather it would have been if she'd been here under the right circumstances and the situation had been different.

Penny wondered what would have happened if she had told Lucas the truth this morning. Would she be sitting next to him in this car now as he drove her back to her hotel? Or would a taxi have been summoned and the door slammed behind her?

She glanced around at Isobel, who was sitting in the back. Flint was next to her on the car seat and she had her arm around him, happily telling him about their plans for the day. The dog was panting heavily, wagging his tail as if he understood exactly what she was saying.

'They're the best of friends,' Lucas said with a grin as she returned her attention frontward.

'Certainly seem to be,' Penny agreed. 'He's a great dog.'

'Yes, and a good guard dog—he's very protective of Isobel.'

They reached the outskirts of the city and drove down towards the old quarter. Bumping over the cobbled streets, Lucas pulled up a little way from her hotel.

'Do you want to go and see your solicitor and pick me up later?' Penny asked, reaching for the door handle.

'No, we'll wait. It will save me doubling back on myself—and anyway I'd like you to meet Salvador and his wife Maria; they are a nice couple.'

Under the circumstances Penny would have preferred not to meet Lucas's solicitor. 'Well, I might be a while, Lucas.'

'That's okay—we'll wait.'

Short of saying she just didn't want to meet Salvador there was nothing else she could do but nod her acceptance and climb out of the car.

Was it her imagination or was she getting more deeply embroiled in this charade with every passing minute? What with last night...Swiftly she tried to turn her mind away from that...and Isobel...and now Lucas's friends...

She turned into the cool air-conditioned foyer of the hotel and tried not to think too deeply about the situation.

'Morning, Ms Kennedy.' The woman behind the desk greeted her cordially, but it set Penny's nerves completely on edge. Just say Lucas had decided to come into the hotel with her—the game would definitely be up now.

With difficulty she put a smile on her face. 'Call me Milly,' she told her firmly. 'Everyone does.'

'Because of your writing name?'

Obviously the man she had spoken to yesterday had spread the word. ‘Yes, that’s right. Any messages for me?’ she asked, quickly changing the subject. Not that she was expecting any messages. Her father thought she was working on board ship and she hadn’t told her work colleagues or friends where she was going.

‘No...no messages.’

‘Okay, thanks. Could I have my room key, please?’

When she reached her bedroom she stripped off her clothes and hurriedly rifled through her wardrobe and found a cool blue summer dress to wear. Then she decided she’d better ring her father and see how he was. So she took her mobile out of her bag and keyed in his number. As she waited for him to answer she walked through to the bathroom and brushed her teeth.

He still hadn’t answered by the time she had finished. She hung up with a frown, wondering where he was. Maybe he was busy out in the fields. It was a little early, but he might be harvesting the sugar cane around now. She sincerely hoped so, because it would mean he could start paying Lucas some more money next month. And if the price of sugar had gone up and the harvest was good maybe he would get another year in his house. Of course if Lucas got his way and served his papers on time it wouldn’t matter what the harvest was like; her father would be finished.

With those sobering thoughts ringing through her mind Penny returned outside to Lucas and Isobel.

‘You weren’t long at all,’ Lucas said as she slipped back into the seat beside him.

‘Well, I tried not to be.’ She noticed the admiring glance he sent in her direction before he slipped the car into gear and pulled out into traffic. It had only been the briefest of looks but it had been purely sexual, and it sent an answering heat of desire racing through her.

Don’t think about that, she told herself fiercely. Last night could never happen again. Her eyes were drawn to his hands on the steering wheel...large, capable hands that had caressed her so passionately, taking her to wild heights of exhilaration.

‘We’ve had a slight change of plan while you’ve been in the hotel,’ Lucas said, changing down a gear so that the powerful car could negotiate the winding roads more easily. ‘I rang Salvador and he’s just driving his mother-in-law home, so I said we’d have lunch and a walk first, then call on him for coffee on the way back.’

‘That’s fine,’ Penny said, relieved that her meeting with his solicitor was being deferred, even if it was only for a few hours.

After travelling a few miles Lucas parked the car at the edge of a headland. ‘The restaurant is over there,’ he said, pointing to a white building in the distance that sat at the edge of a creamy white bay lined with palm trees. ‘We can walk along the beach to it from here, if you are up to it?’

‘Of course I’m up to it,’ she said indignantly. ‘It’s not that far.’

He grinned. ‘Just checking that you aren’t too tired after your disturbed night’s sleep.’

She felt herself blush to the roots of her hair and he laughed.

‘I don’t know what is so funny about that remark,’ she said stiffly.

‘Don’t you?’ His grin seemed to stretch even wider. ‘You should see your face.’ He reached for the door handle. ‘So much for the modern, it-means-nothing remarks last night.’

‘I meant what I said last night,’ Penny replied, and her voice was quiet and steady but her heart was thumping with rapid disapproval.

‘Whatever you say.’ Lucas smiled. ‘But I get the feeling you are more old-fashioned in your outlook than you like to let on.’

‘Milly isn’t old-fashioned,’ Isobel piped up innocently from behind them, reminding them both of the young ears that might not have understood what they were talking about but were listening in just the same. ‘She’s cool.’

‘Thank you, Isobel.’ Penny smiled at the little girl, touched by her intervention. She glanced over at Lucas and couldn’t resist grinning back at him and adding the childish words, ‘So there.’

‘You women always stick together, don’t you?’ he drawled with teasing amusement.

‘That’s because little girls are made of sugar and spice and all things nice, and little boys are made of slugs and snails and puppy dogs’ tails,’ Penny said with wink in Isobel’s direction. ‘So we have to stick together, don’t we, Isobel?’

Isobel giggled. ‘Yep, I reckon.’ She nodded her head.

Together they got out of the car and walked towards the beach. ‘Colin Sal is the naughtiest boy in our school, and he is definitely made of slugs and snails,’ Isobel told Penny, taking hold of her hand as they walked down a winding path under the shade of palm trees. ‘He brought a huge cockroach into school in a matchbox and let it loose in Miss Jenkins’s desk and it ran up her sleeve.’

‘Ugh.’ Penny cringed. ‘Poor Miss Jenkins!’

‘I know.’ Isobel nodded, pleased with Penny’s shocked reaction. ‘And it was huge,’ she added dramatically. ‘About that big...’ She held up her hand to indicate a length of about six inches. ‘Miss Jenkins was nearly crying.’

‘I bet she was.’

‘He’s not a very nice boy,’ Isobel added solemnly.

‘Maybe you’d better keep your distance from him, then?’ Penny suggested with a smile.

‘Maybe...’ Isobel let go of her hand as they reached the end of the path and ran ahead to cut across some rocks. Flint bounded across them with her, wagging his tail and waiting for her as he jumped down on the sand ahead of her.

‘Be careful on the rocks,’ Penny called after her.

‘I will,’ she called back merrily, without checking her speed.

‘Slow down, Isobel,’ Lucas called firmly as he watched her leap from rock to rock. She altered her stride slightly and jumped down onto the sand. ‘I tell her to go carefully on there every time we come and she still insists on racing ahead.’ Lucas reached out a hand to help Penny as they started to follow her across the rock surface.

‘I’ll be okay.’ Penny slipped off her high-heeled sandals and, ignoring his hand, followed in Isobel’s footsteps. Only when she reached the other side did she hesitate. The leap down onto the sand was quite steep.

Lucas jumped down ahead of her and then reached up to help her. Rather than topple down in an ungainly fashion she accepted the help, taking hold of his hand and then gingerly slipping down. He steadied her as her feet connected with the ground and for a moment she was held close against his body. Immediately her senses responded to that closeness. She was aware of the deliciously familiar tang of his cologne and the strength of his arms around her. She glanced up uncertainly and their eyes met. The yearning to be even closer and to feel his lips against hers was intense.

He was the one to step back from her. 'It's a bit of a step down, but worth it for the walk,' he said lightly, as if he hadn't been aware of the instant sexual chemistry that had flared.

Maybe he hadn't, she thought. Maybe last night he had enjoyed his fill of her and was now content to lightheartedly draw a line beneath the episode. She wished she was...but shockingly her traitorous body still seemed to be clamouring for more.

For a while they walked in silence, watching Isobel as she skipped ahead of them, her pink bucket and spade in one hand, the other resting lightly on Flint's head. The sand was warm under Penny's feet, the sun dazzling over the turquoise water. There wasn't another person around for miles.

'It's beautiful here,' Penny said, taking a deep breath of the salt-laced air.

'Just what we needed after being cooped up in that office,' Lucas agreed.

Isobel came running back to show them a shell she had picked up.

'That's very pretty.' Penny took it from her, admiring the pink mother-of-pearl sheen. 'You should keep it—put it on your dressing table and it will always remind you of our perfect day together on the beach.'

'I'll put it on top of my jewellery box,' Isobel said, pleased with the idea. 'Will you keep it safe for me?'

'I will indeed.' Penny opened her purse and put it in.

'You're very good with her,' Lucas remarked casually as they walked on again, Isobel skipping happily ahead. 'You seem a natural around children; I'm surprised you haven't got some of your own.'

'I would like a family one day,' Penny admitted, then, for some reason slightly embarrassed by the admission, added hastily, 'In the distant future, I mean...when I'm ready for settling down.'

'Of course.' He smiled over at her. 'So, tell me—have you ever come close to settling down?'

'Yes, once.'

'But you didn't love him enough to commit?' Lucas hazarded a guess when she didn't continue.

'No. I did love him.' Penny frowned. Usually when she talked about Nick or even thought about him there was a deep feeling of pain and regret inside her, but strangely this morning she felt no sharp jolt...no sadness at all. 'I was crazy about him,' she added. 'We lived together for over a year and were planning to get married.'

'So what happened?'

'Nick wasn't as committed to our relationship as I'd thought. He was seeing someone else.' Penny shrugged. 'So I moved out and she moved in.'

'How long ago was that?'

'Almost two years.'

'So, would you say you are over him now?' Lucas asked curiously.

'Yes, of course.'

Lucas noticed the way her green-gold eyes darkened as she spoke, the way her eyelashes flickered down, hiding the emotions within.

'I heard from a mutual friend not so long ago that they got married last Christmas.'

‘And do you wish them well?’

Penny slanted a wry glance over at him and for a moment her eyes glinted with humour. ‘I was a bit disappointed that they didn’t invite me to the wedding. But apart from that there’s no hard feelings.’

Lucas laughed. ‘Well, obviously the guy is a total idiot.’

‘Obviously,’ Penny agreed dryly. ‘Or maybe he just realised something I didn’t...like we weren’t meant for each other.’ She looked away from Lucas, out across the sea. ‘I used to think he was my perfect other half...that meeting him was kismet...’

‘And then when it all fell apart you thought your chance for happiness has gone?’ Lucas finished the sentence for her and she looked round at him in surprise.

‘That’s how I felt when Kay died. But life goes on, and surprisingly you can find happiness again. Although I have to admit to the odd moment of feeling guilty about that...especially in the early days when I started to take a woman to my bed again.’

‘I’m sorry, Lucas.’ Penny shook her head. ‘I’m talking about a mere affair and you’ve lost your wife.’

‘You lived together; that’s a lot more involved than a mere affair.’

‘Yes...’ Penny’s heart slammed uncomfortably against her chest. Not a lot of people had understood that...but Lucas did. He seemed so honourable...so decent—and she was deceiving him. She swallowed hard on a lump in her throat.

They were reaching the other end of the beach now, and Penny could see the restaurant quite clearly. Tables with pristine white tablecloths were laid out on a long terrace under the shade of a vine-covered canopy.

‘We get the best of both worlds here,’ Lucas said as he allowed her to proceed up some steps ahead of him. ‘The perfect service and food of a top restaurant along with the informality of beachside dining.’

Penny smiled, but inside she was thinking along much deeper lines—such as the fact there was no such thing as having the best of both worlds. At this moment her father was probably working hard in the fields, worrying that he was going to lose everything and that his efforts were going to be in vain. Meanwhile she was here, having lunch with the enemy. Guilt licked through her. Was she for or against Lucas? She wished she could make a decision and stick with it. All this changing her mind and her sympathies back and forward between the two men was tearing her apart.

All right, Lucas’s father had been a rogue and a conman; there was no doubt about that. But that didn’t mean Lucas was from the same mould. On the other hand, there was no doubt that her father didn’t deserve to be in the mess he was in.

Lucas pulled out a chair for her, and then sat down opposite.

Isobel was still playing on the beach; she was busy making sandcastles by the water’s edge, with Flint patiently watching her every move.

‘Shall we leave Isobel to enjoy herself a little longer while we survey the menu?’ Lucas asked, and she nodded in agreement.

‘We won’t leave her too long, though...’ Lucas grinned. ‘As you missed sampling my wonderful pancakes this morning you must be starving.’

‘You’re right—I am.’ She looked across at him and smiled. ‘I was impressed with your culinary skills this morning, by the way.’

‘Maybe you’ll stay and sample them next time,’ he drawled teasingly.

Penny was glad that the waiter appeared beside them at that point, because she honestly didn't know how to respond to that remark. Okay, she knew Lucas was joking around, but she still found the subject of last night difficult to come to terms with. There wouldn't be a next time because it had probably been one of the most foolish moves of her life...it had also been the most pleasurable.

As the waiter greeted Lucas warmly and they talked for a little while her eyes moved over the lean, handsome lines of his face. Lucas was one of the most fascinating and most attractive men she had ever met. She liked the way his eyes lit up with warmth and humour as he talked, and the way there was a slight dimple in his chin when he smiled. Her eyes moved to the darkness of his hair and she remembered the way she had laced her fingers through it as his lips plundered against hers in a sensual moment of complete intimacy, their naked bodies entwined.

He looked over at her and smiled and her heart violently skipped a beat. 'What would you like to drink, Milly?'

'Er...a glass of white wine, please.' Hastily she lifted up the menu and pretended to study it.

Pull yourself together, she told herself furiously. Last night was just sex...don't dwell on it.

There was silence as the waiter disappeared to get their drinks. The only sound the gentle thud of the surf hitting the sand and the hissing as it withdrew.

'Have you made up your mind what you would like?' Lucas asked after a while.

What she would like was the impossible...she wanted more days like this, more nights like last night... She put the menu down, feeling annoyed with herself. 'I think I'll have the seafood.'

'It's good here—very fresh—'

Isobel came hurrying over to the table and interrupted them. 'Can I have pizza and chips, Daddy?'

Lucas considered the question for a moment. 'That's a bit of an unhealthy combination. Will you eat a side salad with it, and some fruit afterwards?'

Isobel wrinkled her nose. 'I suppose.'

Lucas shook his head as the child ran off again to continue making her sandcastles. 'She'd eat rubbish all day if I let her.'

Penny smiled. 'Wouldn't all children?'

'Probably, but I don't think Isobel would get away with half the things she does if Kay was here. She was always very health-conscious—worked out in the gym, did yoga, ate sensibly.'

'It's a big responsibility bringing her up on your own, isn't it?' Penny said softly.

'Being a single parent isn't easy. And of course with work I have to rely quite heavily on Mrs Gordon. But I enjoy being a dad.' He grinned suddenly as he looked over and saw Isobel paddling into the sea, getting the bottom of her pedal-pushers soaked in the process. 'Well, most days I do anyway.'

The waiter brought their drinks and they placed their order for food.

'You will find it difficult if Mrs Gordon is off work for too long,' Penny reflected. 'What will you do?'

Lucas shrugged. 'I suppose I'll need to hire someone to fill the gap. Not an easy task. Isobel adores her, and she is very reliable. But hopefully it won't be for long.'

Penny sipped her wine and wished she could offer to be of some help. She fought down the feeling, telling herself that she would be helping tomorrow, when she took Isobel shopping. That would have to be enough.

They spent an idyllic couple of hours over lunch. The food was wonderful and Lucas and Isobel were great company. Penny felt very at home with them. It was strange...it was as if she had known them all her life. When Lucas glanced at his watch and told them they should be heading off for Salvador's house it was as if a black thunderous cloud had rolled in over the heat of the day.

'Do we have to go, Daddy?' Even Isobel looked crestfallen.

'Afraid so. And I've got work to do this afternoon, young lady, so you'll have to be good and play quietly.'

Isobel wrinkled her nose.

'Never mind—we are going shopping tomorrow,' Penny reminded her. 'That should be fun.'

Lucas got up to settle the bill and then they headed back across the beach.

'What did you do with the papers for Salvador?' Penny asked, her mind running ahead to the all-important meeting with his solicitor.

'I've locked them in the glove compartment of the car.'

Penny found herself hoping that the car might be gone when they got back. Then pulled herself up fiercely. It was hardly the wish of a decent upright citizen. All right, she wanted things to work out for her father—but not at any price.

And what about the price she was paying? Penny thought suddenly. She glanced across at Lucas. She didn't want to lose his friendship, but ultimately that was what was going to happen.

They arrived at the rocks and he reached out a hand to help her climb up towards the car. 'I really enjoyed lunch,' Penny said, trying to ignore the sensation of pleasure as his fingers curved firmly over hers. 'Thank you.'

'Maybe we can do it again some time. Next weekend we could take the yacht and sail around to a different bay.'

'Maybe.' Penny felt her heart thump painfully. Next week she would probably be back in Arbuda, helping her father. She pulled away from him and followed Isobel up towards the road.

They reached the car and Penny helped Isobel dust the sand off her feet and put her shoes on.

'Thanks, Milly.' Lucas picked up the child's bucket and spade. 'I'm just going to get Flint a drink of water from the back of the car. Will you check in the glove compartment and make sure those papers are all there?' He handed her a bunch of keys. 'It's the small gold one.'

Penny looked at the keys and felt her heart go into overdrive. Finally she was going to get her hands on the deeds. Was it too late to do anything about it? Or was this the chance she had been waiting for?

Isobel ran around to the back of the car with her father, and Penny sat sideways in the passenger seat to open the compartment.

The papers were in a large brown envelope. She opened it and looked inside. There were reams of pages appertaining to her father's business partnership with Lawrence Darien. And then, behind them, the old yellowed deeds for the Kennedy estate. Just holding them in her hand sent Penny's mind reeling. Could she slip them into her handbag while Lucas and Isobel were occupied with the dog? She could simply tell Lucas they were missing, that he must have left them behind in the filing cabinet...He'd never suspect that she had them...would he?

'Everything in order?' Lucas's voice from the driver's door behind her made her jump nervously. She hadn't heard him coming around the side of the car.

‘Yes...seems to be.’

‘Great.’ He flashed her a smile and then his eyes moved to the deeds in her hands. ‘It was a bit remiss of me, leaving them in the car, I suppose.’

‘Yes, very careless...But what is it they say? Easy come, easy go?’ Penny couldn’t keep the dry edge out of her tone.

Lucas’s eyebrows lifted slightly. ‘I wouldn’t say those deeds were that easily come by,’ he replied matter-of-factly. ‘According to my father he had years of problems with William Kennedy, and gave the guy umpteen chances to pay back what he owes.’

‘Really?’ Penny had to bite back a terse reply, but there was a wealth of feeling loaded into that one word.

‘Yes, really.’ Lucas was distracted as Isobel started to giggle and mess about with Flint. ‘Come on, Issy, back in the car now.’

Penny had no alternative but to put the deeds away in the envelope. She couldn’t take them now that Lucas had seen them in her hand.

‘Look, Milly, I know you don’t like the thought of evicting someone from their home, and neither do I,’ Lucas continued once the child had obeyed him. ‘But this is business—not charity.’

‘You are really quite cold, aren’t you, Lucas?’ she said brutally. ‘In fact you remind me a bit of a shark circling in the water, the scent of blood around him.’

‘It’s all very well taking the moral high ground,’ Lucas grated sardonically. ‘But with respect you don’t know the first thing about this case.’

Penny wanted to tell him that in fact she probably knew more than he did about it. But she fell silent.

A few minutes later they were driving back down the road. The light-hearted atmosphere that had accompanied lunch had disappeared.

Penny felt tense, and she could feel the beginning of a headache at the back of her eyes. She glanced surreptitiously over at Lucas. He looked stern and unapproachable now. Obviously her little outburst had not pleased him.

Not that she cared, she told herself. Lucas might be a nice guy, but he was his father’s son and blood was thicker than water. And obviously he was going to follow Lawrence Darien’s last instructions to the letter, no matter what.

Lucas slanted a look over at her. ‘I don’t know why we are arguing about this, Milly. I think we should agree to differ on the subject.’

‘Fine.’ Her tone was airily light.

She was aware that he looked at her rather strangely, and she had to force herself to smile and say lightly, ‘As you said, it’s none of my business.’

He turned the car through tall, impressive gateposts and up a long and winding drive. A little while later a white bungalow with blue shutters came into sight. It was built on the edge of a steep terraced garden that afforded magnificent views over the Caribbean. But it wasn’t the sea view that held Penny’s attention, it was the very beautiful young woman who was standing on the doorstep. She had long glossy hair the colour of copper beech and was wearing a flowing white summer dress that had crossover straps at the back and a split up the front, showing a provocative glimpse of tanned shapely legs.

She turned as their car pulled up beside her, and Penny wondered if it was her imagination or if the woman looked rattled at the sight of Lucas.

‘Hi.’ Her voice was slightly breathless. ‘This is a surprise, Lucas. I didn’t expect to see you here.’

‘Hello, Emma,’ Lucas replied as he got out of the car, and it suddenly became clear to Penny why the woman was looking a little uncomfortable. This was Lucas’s ex-girlfriend. ‘I didn’t expect to see you either, but it’s a pleasant surprise.’ He reached her side and kissed her on the cheek. The woman’s skin immediately flushed a bright rosy hue. However, it was the way she looked up at him that really caught Penny’s attention.

She’s still in love with him, Penny realised immediately. There was no mistaking that look of complete and utter adoration, even though the woman made a brave attempt to try and mask it by stepping back from him and looking hastily away. Where had Shauna got the idea that Emma had been the one to end the relationship? Penny wondered. From where she was sitting it certainly didn’t look that way. But then it was hard to read Lucas; it could be that behind that laid-back, relaxed demeanour he was also cut up about their break-up. Maybe he and Emma had just had a lovers’ spat...and she was the consolation prize caught in the middle for one evening. The idea was deeply disturbing. Penny felt a thrust of pain inside her unlike anything she had ever experienced.

Furious with herself, she clenched her hands into tight fists in her lap. Lucas’s love-life was nothing to do with her. And it didn’t matter that their night together had meant nothing. She had known it could never lead to anything anyway, and was perfectly content for it to be exactly what it was...a pleasurable interlude.

Isobel got out of the back seat of the car and ran over to say hello to the woman.

‘Hello, honey.’ Emma smiled at her and the little girl smiled back, but stood slightly sheltered behind her father, reaching up to hold on to his hand.

‘Maria invited me over for coffee at one-thirty,’ Emma said as she reached to pat Flint, who had ambled over towards her.

‘Did she?’ Lucas looked amused for a second. ‘She told me one-thirty for coffee as well.’

‘Oh!’ The woman looked totally uncomfortable now. ‘Look, I had no idea she was planning anything like this.’

‘Neither did I, but you know Maria—she has good intentions.’

‘I suppose she does. But it’s a bit embarrassing, isn’t it?’ Emma glanced over to the car at Penny. ‘Look, I’ll go. Tell Maria I’ll ring her later.’

‘Don’t rush off.’ Lucas frowned. ‘I’m not staying long anyway. I’ve only come to see Salvador on a matter of business—I’ve got to get back to work this afternoon.’

‘Some things don’t change, do they?’ She smiled at him wryly.

‘No.’ He smiled back at her. ‘Well, you know me—’

‘Focused and dedicated.’ She cut across him and then grinned. ‘Yes, I know you.’

There was silence between them for a few seconds and they just continued to look at each other.

Penny was starting to feel a bit awkward. She didn’t know if she should stay in the car, so as not to intrude, or if she should get out and join them.

‘Have you rung the doorbell?’ Lucas asked Emma suddenly.

‘Oh!’ Flustered, the woman reached and pushed the button next to her. ‘No! I forgot! I was just about to when you arrived.’

Lucas glanced back towards Penny, as if only just realising that she was still in the car. ‘Bring the papers out of the glove compartment, will you, Milly?’

‘Certainly, sir,’ Penny murmured under her breath as she opened the glove compartment and took out the deeds for a second time that day.

She didn’t know why but she felt a tinge annoyed that when Lucas had finally dragged his attention away from Emma it had just been to send a businesslike request in her direction. Maybe it was his way of letting Emma know that she was just a work colleague and nothing more. Well, that was his prerogative, she supposed. And as she wasn’t planning on sticking around here for more than a few days more she had no right to feel annoyed by it.

As she got out of the car the front door swung open and an attractive brunette greeted them warmly. ‘Lucas and Emma—how lovely that you should arrive together.’

‘Well, I think that is more by your design than ours,’ Emma said, reaching to kiss the woman on the cheek. ‘I’ll forgive you just this once. But only because you are pregnant, Maria. Don’t pull an outrageous stunt like this again.’

‘Well, you know what they say—the course of true love never does run smooth. And as you two are my dearest friends I just thought you needed your heads banging together...’ Maria trailed off in consternation as she suddenly saw Penny walking around the other side of the car. ‘Oh...!’

‘This is Milly Bancroft,’ Lucas interjected smoothly. ‘Milly, this is Maria Sandenio and Emma Johnson.’

Taking pity on Maria, who clearly thought she had made a major social gaffe, and to some extent on Emma, who looked as if she was wearing a hair shirt, Penny smiled brightly at them both. ‘Pleased to meet you. I’m Lucas’s PA.’

‘Oh!’ Maria looked marginally reassured, but Penny could tell that she still wasn’t completely sure what the status was between her and Lucas. ‘Well, it’s good to meet you too. Come on in—let’s not stand out here in the heat any longer.’

Penny handed Lucas the brown envelope as she passed him to go inside and their eyes met briefly. She wondered if he was thankful that she had introduced herself as his PA. After all, if he wanted a reconciliation with Emma it would help clear the path. But it was hard to tell what was going on behind that dark, steady gaze.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SALVADOR met them in the lounge. He was older than his wife; Maria only looked as if she was in her late twenties whilst Salvador was probably in his early forties. His dark hair was tinged with grey at the temples, and he was on the portly side, yet there was a warmth and vigour about him that was immensely attractive.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ he said, shaking Penny’s hand firmly.

Penny smiled back, liking Lucas’s friends and wishing again that she were not here under false pretences.

‘So these are the infamous papers, are they?’ Salvador said, turning to take the envelope from Lucas.

‘Yes, we finally unearthed them yesterday.’

‘Right—well, let’s go through to my study and take a look at them, shall we?’ Before anyone could say anything else Salvador had steered Lucas from the room. ‘Won’t be long, ladies,’ he said as he closed the door behind them.

‘Now, where have we heard that before?’ Emma said to Maria with a grin. ‘Do you remember the time when the four of us went to Vieques for the weekend and those two spent the whole afternoon going through some business papers?’

‘Vaguely...Now, shall we have tea or coffee?’ Maria smiled over at Penny and indicated that she should make herself comfortable on one of the cream leather armchairs.

‘Gosh, you must remember that weekend, Maria,’ Emma continued, apparently blithely unaware that her friend was trying to change the subject in deference to Penny. ‘We had the most wonderful time. It was such a romantic hotel, and Lucas bought me that picture I loved of the old lighthouse at Isabel Segunda.’

‘Oh, yes...I kind of remember that.’ Maria flicked a narrow-eyed look over at Emma. But she was totally oblivious to it and was settling herself at one end of the settee.

‘We were both a bit put out about them bringing work with them, though...weren’t we? But that’s men for you. Honestly, I’m sure Lucas could stay cooped up quite happily in an office for days on end. When we were dating I used to refer to his work as the other woman...and I don’t suppose he has changed any?’ She glanced over at Penny for clarification.

‘Well...I couldn’t say,’ Penny murmured. ‘I haven’t been working for him that long.’

Emma nodded and seemed pleased with the reply.

Penny wondered if the woman was trying to score points by drawing attention to their wonderful romantic weekend, or if she was just still smarting about their split-up and blamed a lot of it on Lucas’s work.

‘Now, then, what can I get you to drink?’ Maria tried again to distract the conversation. ‘Cola for you, Isobel?’

Isobel nodded.

‘And what about you ladies...tea or coffee?’

‘Whatever you are making is fine with me,’ Penny said politely.

‘Coffee would be great,’ Emma said decisively.

As soon as Maria had headed out of the room Isobel sat on Penny’s knee and cuddled close against her. ‘Can I have lemonade instead?’ she asked in a stage whisper.

‘I don’t know—maybe Maria doesn’t have lemonade. Why don’t you go after her and ask?’

Isobel shook her head shyly.

‘Shall I go and ask for you?’

Isobel nodded, pleased by the suggestion. Emma, on the other hand, suddenly looked annoyed. What was the matter with her? Penny wondered, as she slipped Isobel from her knee.

‘So, Isobel...tell me all the news. What’s been happening since I’ve seen you last?’ Emma asked in a cosy tone as Penny left the room.

She found Maria opening and closing cupboards in a kitchen that looked out onto a terrace with a spectacular view. ‘Sorry to intrude, but Isobel was wondering if she could change her mind and have lemonade?’ Penny asked as the woman turned.

‘Yes, of course she can.’ Maria turned and took a bottle from the fridge. ‘Actually, I’m glad to have a moment alone with you. Sorry about before...you know...’ The woman looked over at her and grimaced. ‘Trying to fix Lucas back up with Emma was a wild idea. I’d no idea he was seeing someone else—’

‘You’ve no need to apologise to me,’ Penny said sincerely. ‘Really, I’m not in the running where Lucas is concerned.’

Maria didn’t look entirely convinced.

‘He’s a very attractive man, but...’ Penny shrugged, and then for some reason—maybe because the woman seemed so genuinely upset at the situation—she found herself confiding in her. ‘To be honest, I don’t think I’ll be staying around here for much longer,’ she said, lowering her voice. ‘Although I haven’t told Lucas that yet.’

‘That’s a shame. He seems to think very highly of you. I just overheard him talking to Salvador about how invaluable you’ve been these last few days. How Isobel in particular has taken a shine to you.’

‘Yes...I’m going to really miss Isobel.’ Penny felt her heart bounce unevenly against her chest.

Maria glanced over at her.

‘But things aren’t particularly working out for me here,’ Penny continued, trying to sound practical. ‘So it’s best I move on.’

Maria didn’t probe further. ‘Salvador will be furious with me for inviting Emma today. He is always telling me off for getting involved in other people’s problems. It’s just I felt sorry for her. She and Lucas seemed to be happy for a while; in fact I hadn’t seen Lucas so relaxed since...well, since before Kay died, I suppose. Then with no apparent reason at all he just finished with her. And I was wondering if he really wanted to finish with her or if it was a case of cold feet—maybe he felt he was getting too close to her and panicked. I sometimes think he still feels a bit uncomfortable about dating other women...he was so in love with Kay, you see.’ Maria finished loading the tray. ‘Does that sound silly? Maybe he wanted to finish with Emma...I’m just guessing.’

‘No, it doesn’t sound silly,’ Penny murmured, remembering how Lucas had that very afternoon admitted to feeling guilty when he’d started to take women to his bed again. ‘He could very easily have ended it for those reasons.’

‘Well, as Salvador would say, it is none of my business. But really I just want Lucas to be happy. I think he deserves it after all he’s been through.’

Penny moved to take the heavy tray from her. ‘Here—let me help. I think you are carrying enough around with you,’ she added wryly, indicating the very evident bump of her pregnancy.

Maria laughed and patted her bump proudly. ‘You’re right.’

‘When is the baby due?’ Penny asked, glad to be able to move to a lighter subject. She didn’t want to think about how much Lucas might be in love with Emma...the subject seemed to send her senses into disarray.

‘Two weeks tomorrow.’

‘Not long, then. Have you got everything packed and ready?’

‘Oh, yes. The case is sitting by the bedroom door. Every time I so much as sigh Salvador is looking at me anxiously, wondering if he should run to pick it up and shoo me out to the car.’

Penny laughed. ‘I take it nerves are running high?’

‘Just a little. I think he’s almost more nervous and excited than me.’

Maria opened the lounge door for her.

‘Did you have lemonade, Aunt Maria?’ Isobel asked shyly as they walked in.

‘Yes, honey.’ Maria took the glass off the tray and handed it over to her. ‘Now, what have you two been talking about?’

‘Isobel has been telling me that Mrs Gordon is in hospital,’ Emma said, accepting the china cup and saucer that Maria passed over to her.

‘No!’ Maria looked over at Penny for confirmation.

‘She slipped on the kitchen floor last night and Lucas took her down to Casualty,’ Penny said with a nod. ‘They are keeping her in for observation.’

‘Poor woman.’ Maria looked upset.

‘I wonder how Lucas will manage without her,’ Emma reflected, just as the door opened and the men returned.

‘I take it you are talking about Mrs Gordon?’ Lucas said as he crossed towards the mantelpiece.

‘Yes, Milly was just telling us.’ Emma looked over at him with concern. ‘How will you manage without her?’

‘I might have to employ someone else, but hopefully it won’t be for long. Thank you, Maria.’ He smiled at her as she handed him a cup of coffee.

‘Does that mean someone else will be looking after me, Daddy?’ Isobel’s small voice cut into the conversation. She had a heavy frown across her brow.

‘Maybe,’ Lucas answered cautiously. ‘But only until Mrs Gordon gets better.’

‘Will it be somebody I know?’

Lucas shook his head. ‘But you soon will know her.’

‘But I don’t want anybody else.’ Isobel suddenly looked as if she was going to cry. ‘Unless it is someone I know.’ She glanced over at Penny. ‘Will you look after me, Milly?’ she asked, her eyes wide and pleading, her tone tearful.

Penny was very conscious of everyone’s eyes on her, and at the same time her heart went out to the child. She would have given anything to have been able to say yes. ‘Well, it’s not quite as simple as that, Isobel,’ she said instead, softly. ‘But your daddy is very clever, and he will find someone really nice for you, I’m sure.’

‘Of course I will.’ Lucas put his coffee down and went to pick up the little girl and sit down with her on his knee. ‘And Mrs Gordon will be back soon.’

Isobel nodded, but her bottom lip was trembling.

Penny wished she could have offered to do more. She glanced over and caught Emma’s eyes on her. The woman was staring at her with a look of open resentment and it suddenly occurred to Penny that she wasn’t at all pleased about Isobel requesting her help.

‘So how is work going, Lucas?’ Maria asked brightly, trying to change the subject once again. ‘You weren’t as long in that office as we’d thought.’

‘That’s because things are fairly much in order.’ Lucas rocked Isobel on his knee soothingly. ‘Salvador’s help is invaluable. I can’t thank him enough for squeezing me into his busy schedule.’

‘No thanks necessary,’ Salvador said swiftly. ‘And there is no reason at all why everything shouldn’t be settled by the end of the month. As I said earlier, Lucas, now you have those deeds I think you will definitely be taking possession of that land on time, and then the building work can begin. Under Arbuda law once building work has started they won’t be able to revoke the permission for it. So if you make an agreement with the contractor who wants to buy the place and allow him access to start immediately there should be no problem.’

Penny felt the blood drain away from her face at those words. She had been worrying about Isobel... about stupid things like did Lucas really love Emma...and her father was about to lose his home. Where were her priorities?

‘Are you all right, Milly?’ Maria asked her suddenly. ‘You look a bit pale.’

Aware that Lucas’s eyes were on her, Penny forced herself to smile. ‘I’ve got a bit of a headache, actually, but it’s nothing. It will pass.’

‘Shall I get you a couple of painkillers and a glass of water?’ Maria asked kindly.

‘No—really, I’m fine. Thank you.’

‘I suppose we should make a move,’ Lucas said, glancing at his watch. ‘Leave you good folks in peace.’

‘You don’t have to,’ Maria said immediately. ‘We were hoping you’d all stay. Salvador was going to light the barbecue later.’

‘Another time, Maria,’ Lucas said, getting to his feet. ‘But thank you for the invitation.’

Everyone stood up and walked with them through to the front door.

Penny noticed that Emma put a hand on Lucas’s arm, detaining him. ‘If you need any help, Lucas, don’t hesitate to call me,’ she said in a breathy undertone.

‘Thank you, Emma, that’s very kind.’ Isobel wriggled to get out of his arms and he put her down, allowing her to run outside to where Flint was sitting waiting patiently for them.

‘I mean it,’ Emma continued earnestly. ‘As you know, I finish work most days around four-thirty. I’d be happy to look after Isobel for you.’

Penny didn’t hear what Lucas’s reply was because Flint started to bark excitedly as Isobel ran around the lawn with him. But out of the corner of her eye she did see Lucas bend to kiss Emma lightly on the cheek. She put both hands on his arms and leaned closer and kissed him back.

Hastily Penny averted her gaze completely.

‘It was lovely meeting you,’ Maria said in a low tone as they stepped outside together. ‘And I hope we get to see you again before you leave.’

Penny smiled. ‘It was nice meeting you too. And I wish you all the best with your baby. Have you any idea if it is a he or a she?’

‘No, it’s going to be a surprise.’

‘A wonderful surprise,’ Salvador agreed, putting an arm around his wife.

As they drove away from the house Penny glanced back and saw the couple still standing in the garden with their arms around each other, waving. Emma, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen.

‘Your friends are lovely,’ Penny said as she settled back and fastened her seatbelt.

‘Yes, I think so.’ Lucas pulled out onto the road again and they followed the narrow lanes in silence for a while. ‘How are you feeling now?’ Lucas asked as they approached a junction.

‘I’ve still got a bit of a headache,’ Penny admitted, and it was the truth. Her head was pounding with a dull ache—due, no doubt, to tension.

‘I’ll take you back to your hotel and you can have the rest of the day off,’ Lucas said immediately. ‘You’re probably tired.’

‘What about the papers you were anxious to find?’ she asked curiously. ‘Don’t you need them any more?’

Lucas shook his head. ‘Salvador says we have enough with what I brought him today to proceed.’

‘I see.’ Her voice was bleak. So that was that. Her last chance to help her father had definitely passed. And she had squandered a couple of her chances...had been too busy thinking about Lucas when she should have been thinking about her father. Guilt settled like a heavy weight throughout her body. She might as well leave as soon as she could get a flight.

‘Will you be well enough to come shopping with me tomorrow?’ Isobel asked from the back of the car. And suddenly her guilt was twofold. She couldn’t let Isobel down.

‘Yes, I’ll be fine, Isobel. I’ll get a good night’s sleep and everything will be better tomorrow.’

Even as she said the words she knew they were far from the truth. Things could only get worse tomorrow. For a start it was Monday morning and the real Mildred Bancroft might very well turn up. Also, Salvador would probably post the letter of eviction tomorrow and that would end all her father’s hopes for the future. Yes, tomorrow could be a very bad day indeed.

Penny fell silent, lost in her own thoughts of the future...a future without Lucas and Isobel.

As Lucas reached the outskirts of old San Juan he was caught up in heavy traffic. The streets were filled with people in colourful clothing and large floats were being brought down the narrow roads. ‘There is obviously some kind of festival on today,’ Lucas said with a shake of his head. ‘We might be a while getting down to your hotel.’

‘Just drop me here and I can walk,’ Penny said quickly. ‘I’d like the fresh air anyway.’

‘Are you sure?’ Lucas glanced over at her. ‘If your head is bad you shouldn’t be out in this heat.’

‘Really, Lucas, just drop me here,’ Penny insisted. ‘A walk will do me good.’

Lucas pulled the car away from the crowds and stopped under the shade of an umbrella pine. ‘Isobel and I will walk down with you.’

Penny looked into the back seat of the car. ‘I think Isobel has had enough excitement for one day,’ she said softly.

Lucas followed her gaze and noted that the child was asleep, with her head resting on Flint for a pillow.

‘I think you are right.’ Lucas smiled.

‘Anyway, thank you for a lovely lunch and I’ll see you tomorrow bright and early in the office.’

Lucas reached out and caught hold of her arm as she made to turn away. ‘Haven’t you forgotten something?’

‘I don’t think so.’ Her heart seemed to slam against her chest as she looked back at him, her green eyes wide in her face. Was he going to kiss her? The thought was enough to send her blood pressure soaring.

‘Your handbag.’ He smiled and picked up her bag from the floor beside her. She couldn’t believe that she had nearly forgotten it! It showed the state of her mind.

‘Oh, yes! Sorry.’ She took it from him, feeling flustered, wondering if he realised she had thought he meant a kiss. ‘Thank you.’ She reached again for the door handle.

‘Milly?’

She looked around at him, wondering what she had forgotten this time. And that was when he leaned closer and kissed her. It was just a light touch of his lips against hers, but the sensation sent wild forces of desire shooting through her, made her senses swim in disarray. In that instant she wanted to move closer and be held in his arms, give herself up to the sheer pleasure of his caresses.

‘Thank you for today, and for being so nice to Isobel,’ he murmured as he pulled back.

‘It wasn’t hard,’ she whispered in an unsteady tone, trying very hard to pull herself together. ‘She’s a wonderful child.’

‘Well, I think so—but I’m biased.’ He grinned.

Something about that lopsided grin made her heart lurch crazily. She stared into the darkness of his eyes. I’m in love with him, she thought suddenly.

The thought shocked her to her core. She couldn’t love him—he was her father’s enemy. Of all the people in the world to choose from he was the one she couldn’t have. Maybe that was why the thought had crossed her mind. She always had been contrary, she reflected angrily.

‘Anyway, I’d better go.’ She swallowed hard and opened the door. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow at work.’

‘Yes, see you tomorrow.’ He watched her climb out of the car. ‘Hope your headache clears. Take some aspirin.’

It would take more than aspirin to clear what was wrong with her, she thought angrily as she walked away from him and merged with the crowds further down the street.

When Penny arrived at her hotel she was glad to find that it was the friendly woman receptionist on duty. She handed over her key without any pertinent remark or question and wished her a pleasant afternoon.

Penny escaped up to her room with a feeling of relief, and then lay on the bed looking up at the ceiling, trying to come to terms with the situation.

She wasn't in love with Lucas, she told herself over and over again. And to prove it she lifted the directory next to her and found the number for the airport. Her time here was over. She would book a flight for tomorrow. With determination she lifted the phone next to her bed.

The deed done, she lay back against the pillows. There... Tomorrow at a quarter to midnight she would get on a flight for Arbuda and go home to help and support her father.

The thought should have brought her some comfort. She was finally doing the right thing. She should never have come here in the first place. She imagined what her father would say if he knew... what he would think if he knew she had slept with the enemy! He would be devastated. No... Lucas had never been meant for her. He would be happier with Emma anyway... she was deeply in love with him and seemed genuinely fond of Isobel.

Penny rolled over and buried her head in the pillow, and tried to ignore the ache in her heart.

CHAPTER NINE

IT SEEMED unfair that the sun should still be shining when Penny had such a black hole in her heart. Even Shauna's bright, happy good morning grated on her.

'Morning, Shauna.' She gave the girl a strained smile.

'Are you okay? You look a bit pale,' the woman said.

'I'm fine,' Penny lied. In fact she felt anything but fine. 'Is Lucas in the office yet?'

'Oh, yes. He was in before me, as usual. He's not in a good mood, though, so I would advise you to keep your head down.'

'Really?' Penny frowned; Lucas didn't strike her as a moody person. 'What's wrong with him?'

'Beats me.' Shauna shrugged. 'He was on the phone when I arrived. Maybe it's something to do with that.'

Penny brushed a hand nervously down over her pale pink dress and tried to prepare herself for going into the inner sanctum to face him. She had decided that before she left she should come clean and tell him the truth. That meant saying something either this morning or later today, when she had taken Isobel shopping.

'There is a stack of mail this morning,' Shauna said, going through the pile with a frown. 'We are still very behind with things, thanks to the amount of sorting out since his father passed away.'

'Do you want me to help you go through those?' Penny asked, trying to put off the inevitable. If Lucas was in a bad mood, now was probably not the time to tell him the truth. And anyway, on reflection, maybe it would be best to tell him after her shopping trip with Isobel. If she told him before he might cancel the outing and Isobel would be devastated. Being out here with Shauna, keeping herself otherwise occupied, seemed an infinitely better idea.

'Thanks, Mildred.' Shauna passed her half of the correspondence. 'How was your weekend?'

'It was okay,' Penny answered lightly, trying not to think of the wonderful night of passion and the idyllic lunch at the Smugglers' Inn. 'What about you?'

Shauna waved her left hand in front of Penny's nose and she noticed for the first time the big diamond engagement ring on her finger. 'Paul proposed to me.'

'Oh, Shauna that's wonderful—congratulations.'

'Thank you.' The woman had a smile on her face that seemed to light up the entire room. 'I've never been so happy in all my life—I adore him.'

'I'm very happy for you,' Penny said with genuine warmth. 'Have you set a date yet?'

'We are talking about taking the first available one we can get at the church. I don't want to wait. My mother is a bit wary, though; she wants us to have a long engagement because we haven't known each other that long. But I said to her that when you meet the man you want to spend the rest of your life with you want

the rest of your life to start straight away...And anyway, I just knew when I first met Paul that he was the right one for me. I just looked into his eyes and that was it. I was hooked.'

Penny thought back to when she had walked into this office last week and had first looked into Lucas's eyes. Something had happened in that moment, something momentous. Oh, she had tried to pretend otherwise...had tried to convince herself that the butterflies and the wild palpitations were all in her imagination. But they weren't. She was in love with him, had been from that first day. It was crazy and foolish and downright disloyal to her father, but she couldn't help herself. It was the reason she had gone to bed with him on Saturday...and it was the reason she didn't want to tell him who she was because then it would be over. And she didn't want it to be over.

Penny stared down at the envelopes in front of her and tried to be sensible and shut out the thoughts. But they were unfolding in her mind with a relentless certainty that refused to be ignored. Luckily Shauna didn't appear to notice that she had gone extremely quiet. She was telling Penny that she wanted a big white wedding with all the trimmings.

The phone rang, and as Shauna dealt with it Penny sat down on a stool at the far end of the desk and started to go through the mail.

'Lucas Shipping, how may I help?' Shauna said breezily. 'Sorry, he's not in his office at the moment. Can I take your details and get him to phone you back? Okay...no problem.' Shauna put the phone back down. 'Someone else trying to sell us insurance,' she muttered. 'So, anyway, as I was saying, my mother is adamant—' The outer door opened and she broke off as a woman walked in.

'How may I help?' Penny heard Shauna ask politely, but she didn't glance over. She was trying to sort out her priorities at the same time as sort through the mail. Her father had to be her main concern—

'Mildred Bancroft for Mr Darien,' a voice said briskly.

Penny felt her blood start to freeze in her veins and she looked up in horror.

'Sorry?' Shauna was looking at the woman blankly. 'Eh...did you want to see Mildred or Mr Darien?'

The woman frowned. She looked a little like an old-fashioned schoolmarm—the type who peered disapprovingly over heavy-rimmed glasses and gave detention if you so much as sneezed. Her grey hair was tied back in a severe style, away from her lined face, and she wore a plain white blouse and black skirt. 'I think you misunderstand, young woman,' she said in a tone that implied Shauna was slightly thick. 'I am Mildred Bancroft, here to see Mr Darien.'

Shauna's mouth literally dropped open and she looked helplessly around at Penny. If the situation hadn't been so grave the look on her face would have been comical. But Penny wasn't in any mood to laugh. 'You'd better tell Lucas she is here,' Penny murmured numbly.

Before either of them could move the office door opened and Lucas appeared. He looked formidable, his face drawn in a stern expression that Penny had never seen before—an expression that made her stomach knot with even more tension.

'Ah, you must be Mr Darien?' the woman said hopefully. 'I phoned you earlier.'

'Yes...Mildred Bancroft I presume?' Lucas said heavily.

'That's right.' The woman walked around the desk and held her hand out. 'Good to finally meet you.'

'Yes, likewise...' Lucas shook hands with her and then waved her through to his office. For a moment his eyes connected with Penny's. It was a cold, austere look that was a million miles from the way he had looked at her yesterday. 'You can come through as soon as I've dealt with Ms Bancroft,' he told her curtly. It was more of an order than an invitation, and then the door closed firmly behind him.

‘Well!’ Shauna swivelled around to look at Penny. ‘What on earth is going on? And if that is Mildred Bancroft then who are you?’

‘Sorry, Shauna.’ Penny swept a shaking hand through the long length of her hair. ‘It was just that you jumped to all the wrong conclusions when I came in to see Lucas that day, and I was so desperate that I just went along with it.’

‘Golly!’ Shauna’s eyes were so wide they seemed to swamp her face. ‘Had you been unemployed for a long time...was that it?’

‘No...I just...’ Penny shrugged helplessly. She didn’t want to start explaining to Shauna before she had a chance to tell Lucas her side of things.

‘Look, don’t worry about it,’ Shauna said softly. ‘I’m sure Mr Darien will forgive you, because, let’s face it, you’re great at the job—things have been so much easier in this office since you arrived.’

‘Thanks, Shauna.’ Penny smiled at the woman gratefully and wished things were that simple.

‘He’d never have employed that sourpuss anyway. At least I hope not!’ Shauna made a face. ‘Did you see the way she looked down her nose at me? Snooty woman—who did she think she was?’

‘She thought she was Mildred Bancroft,’ Penny answered dryly, her sense of humour coming briefly to her rescue.

Shauna met her eyes and giggled.

The office door opened at that moment and Mildred Bancroft appeared. Head held high, she marched through the office and without so much as a glance in their direction departed, leaving a freezing trail of mystery in her wake.

The door to Lucas’s office was left wide open, but there was no sign of Lucas.

‘What do you think happened?’ Shauna mouthed silently.

Penny shrugged her shoulders.

‘Milly, get yourself in here.’ Lucas’s voice boomed from within.

A sinking feeling in her stomach, Penny got to her feet.

‘Good luck,’ Shauna whispered.

‘Thanks—I’ve got a feeling I’m going to need it.’

Lucas was sitting behind his desk, his dark head bent as he scribbled some notes on a form in front of him. ‘Close the door,’ he said bluntly, without looking up.

She did as he asked and then proceeded cautiously towards the desk. Still Lucas didn’t glance up.

‘Before you start tearing into me, I just want to say that I’m sorry.’ She said the words quickly. ‘I shouldn’t have deceived you like that. It was wrong of me and I apologise unequivocally.’

Lucas threw his pen down and then leaned back in his chair. Their eyes met.

It was hard to tell what he was thinking. He looked very cool. But it was his silence that totally alarmed Penny. If he had shouted and ranted she probably could have coped better. But this steely look of complete disapproval tore into her like a knife. If he looked at her like this now, what would it be like when he discovered she was William Kennedy’s daughter?

‘Look, I really am sorry.’ She tried again. ‘I didn’t set out to pretend to be someone else, and I’m not a dishonest person.’

He folded his arms in front of him. ‘So who are you?’ he asked quietly.

Her heart slammed against her chest and her knees suddenly felt weak. She sat down in the chair opposite to him. ‘You can call me Penny,’ she said, feebly backing away from telling him her surname.

‘Oh, can I?’ he grated sardonically. ‘How kind. And is this another pseudonym? Is the real Penny about to march in to see me in a few days’ time as well?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she muttered with a flash of annoyance. ‘Look, I’m sorry...I did try to tell you that I wasn’t Mildred when I came in here last week, but you didn’t give me a chance. You were really desperate for someone to help you out in here, don’t forget.’

‘Oh, and you were just being charitable, were you?’ One eyebrow lifted disdainfully. ‘Fancied a bit of social work? Hmm, was that it?’

‘No...of course not.’ She shrugged helplessly. ‘I don’t know what happened that day. You just looked at me and...I don’t know...The next minute I was in this web of lies.’

‘I think you’ve had plenty of chances since then to put me right,’ he drawled softly. ‘And you didn’t take any of them.’

She felt her cheeks flare with colour. ‘No...you’re right. I didn’t,’ she admitted shakily. ‘But I wanted to.’

‘So what stopped you?’ He stared at her with a cold, penetrating intensity.

‘I suppose the fear that you’d look at me the way you are looking at me now,’ she admitted huskily.

There was silence for a moment.

‘I just...’ She trailed off helplessly.

‘Needed the job?’ he finished for her wryly.

‘Well...I was going to say I just got caught up in the moment. You asked me if I’d start straight away and I found myself agreeing.’ She shrugged. ‘It was crazy—I knew the real Mildred would probably turn up sooner or later, but—’

‘But you figured you would prove yourself and make yourself indispensable in the meantime?’

‘I wasn’t going to say that,’ she replied, and sent him a fulminating glare from sea-green eyes as her old spirit kicked in. ‘Stop finishing my sentences for me.’

‘Hey, you are in no position to start dictating terms,’ he reminded her crisply, but there was a brief flicker of amusement in his eyes now. ‘So I take it the agency sent you and when you got here you discovered the job had already gone. I can understand you being annoyed. You’d travelled a long way to get here. You should have just told me the truth. That agency doesn’t seem to know what the hell it’s doing. I’ve been on the phone to them this morning and talked to some woman who was totally clueless. Couldn’t even find my file and kept me on hold for twenty minutes. I hung up in the end.’

‘They don’t seem very professional,’ Penny murmured uncomfortably. ‘But they are not completely to blame here—’

‘Well, they may have a good reputation but I won’t be using them again.’ Lucas shook his head. ‘But you should have been honest. You didn’t need to go to so much trouble to get the damn job, as it turns out.’ He leaned forwards suddenly. ‘Because, given the choice between you and the real Mildred, I would have given you the job anyway.’

‘Would you?’ She felt her heart speeding up as conflicting emotions spun through her. There was a part of her that didn’t want him to start being nice about this—it just made it even more difficult to tell him the whole truth.

‘Where has she been anyway?’ she asked distractedly.

‘Family commitments kept her in Barbados for longer than she had anticipated.’ Lucas shook his head. ‘Can you imagine? She actually thought she could waltz in here and start work days late without so much as a phone call of explanation. Anyway, I told her that the agency had sent someone else and that I couldn’t afford to sit around waiting for her.’

‘Oh!’ Penny stared at him in consternation. ‘You mean you sent her packing!’

‘Well, I wouldn’t use those words exactly.’ Lucas shrugged. ‘We had an amicable meeting. She understood my dilemma. She tried to say that she had written to me, telling me the date she would arrive. But I didn’t receive the letter—and anyway, frankly, it’s just too late now.’

He tapped his fingers on the desk impatiently. ‘Then she had the nerve to tell me that my receptionist wasn’t as efficient as she should be.’ He frowned. ‘A bit of a nerve, don’t you think, when she was late for her job? She wouldn’t have fitted in here anyway.’

Penny bit down on her lip. ‘So...she’s not coming back, then?’ she ventured cautiously.

‘No.’ He smiled. ‘She’s not coming back. I just told you that.’

‘I see.’ Penny stared at him guiltily. Now she had lost the woman her job! ‘Do you think that maybe you’ve been a bit hasty? Have you got a contact number for her?’

‘I don’t need a number for her because I won’t be contacting her,’ Lucas said flatly, and then sat back in his seat. ‘So...I suppose what I’m saying is, if you want the job here it’s yours.’

Penny sat in stunned silence for a moment. She hadn’t expected this. As soon as Mildred Bancroft had arrived she’d envisaged him telling her to pack up her stuff and leave.

‘I don’t like dishonesty in any form...Penny,’ he continued briskly. ‘But I’ve thought about it and I can see you must have been very upset, travelling all that way for a job that had been allocated to someone else. So...’ He stood up from behind the desk and walked around towards her. ‘I’ll overlook your propensity for shady behaviour just this once.’ The words were said with a shade of wry humour. He perched on the edge of the desk beside her. ‘What do you say? Shall we start from the beginning again?’

Penny would have given anything to just say yes...But how could she? She didn’t belong here. She belonged in Arbuda, with her father, or on board the cruise liner doing her own job...This was all a lie. ‘It’s a bit more complicated than that,’ she said huskily.

‘No, it’s not. You just should have told me the truth up front...Penny...’

The sound of her name on his lips made her heart leap. It sounded so warm and delicious and...She pulled her thoughts back from that dangerous abyss.

‘I know I should.’ There was a long silence where she tried to pull herself together. She needed to tell him everything. Maybe if she threw herself at his mercy he’d be lenient with her father. And maybe he wouldn’t...Maybe it would make things worse for her father. The thought froze her. Lying about her name was bad...lying about what she was doing here was a lot worse. Maybe she should tell him as little as possible and just exit gracefully from the situation. At least that way he wouldn’t hate her. She couldn’t stand for him to hate her.

‘The thing is I’m feeling tremendously guilty that I’ve lost Mildred Bancroft her job.’

‘I wouldn’t waste your energy with that,’ Lucas said firmly. ‘If you hadn’t come along when you did I’d have got someone else. I was at the end of my tether waiting for her anyway.’ His eyes flicked over her

assessingly. 'So, now we have all that cleared up, will you stay on here as my PA?'

Her heart was beating furiously against her ribcage. She moistened her lips nervously and then took a deep breath. 'I can't, Lucas,' she said softly. 'I'm sorry.'

He frowned, and there was a long pause before he said heavily, 'Do you mind telling me why not?'

'I have personal reasons. But I don't think it's working out here for me anyway.' She forced herself to say the words, but her voice was husky and anything but sure.

'Has this got anything to do with what happened between us on Saturday night?'

The direct question and the way his eyes were searching over her face made her blush uncontrollably. 'No...of course not.'

'Are you sure?' he asked gently.

'Of course I'm sure.' His closeness was a little unnerving. If she moved a fraction of an inch her leg would be touching his. And she could smell the evocative tang of his cologne. It brought back memories of being in his arms, running her fingers through his hair, their naked bodies pressed close.

'I suppose businesswise what happened between us was a mistake. But—' He broke off as the phone rang on his desk. 'Shauna, will you hold my calls?' he called impatiently through to the outer office. But the phone continued to ring. 'Shauna—the phone.' He raised his voice an octave and the ringing stopped.

'This is nothing to do with what happened on Saturday night,' she cut in quickly, before he could say anything more. 'I told you...that was just a bit of fun. I've forgotten it already.'

He raised one eyebrow. 'Is that a fact?' he drawled coolly.

'Yes.' Her eyes connected with his for a second before she rapidly looked away.

'I think you are wrong about that,' he said softly. 'It wasn't just a bit of fun.'

The calm, husky timbre of his tone set her pulses racing. She looked back up at him uncertainly.

'It was a lot of fun,' he finished distinctly.

The flare of disappointment inside her was acute, and she realised that deep down she had been hoping he was going to say something else. Stupid of her, really, but in that heartbeat of a moment a whole load of romantic notions had raced through her head—notions of him telling her that their lovemaking had affected him as profoundly as it had her.

Idiot, she berated herself angrily. Their night together had just been a passing distraction, and a man as attractive and as sexy as Lucas probably had a lot of them. If Lucas was going to get serious about anyone it would be Emma.

'Penny?' As she looked away from him he put a hand under her chin and gently tipped her face so that she was forced to meet his gaze again. His eyes held hers, steady and somehow intense. They seemed to reach straight into her soul.

'Will you at least stay on until I can find someone to replace you?' The businesslike question was very much at odds with the gentle tone of his voice, the touch of his hand against her skin.

'I don't think I can,' she whispered helplessly, and pulled away from his touch. But even though she had broken the contact with him her skin seemed to burn from his touch.

There was a tap on the office door. 'Mr Darien, it's the call you have been waiting for from Arbuda,' Shauna said apologetically as she stuck her head around the door. Her glance moved from Penny to Lucas, noting the fact that he wasn't behind the desk but sitting quite close to her.

‘Tell him I’ll phone him back,’ Lucas said calmly.

‘I think it’s important. He sounded agitated and demanded to speak to you.’

‘Tell him I’ll phone him back.’ This time Lucas’s tone brooked no argument and Shauna hurriedly closed the door.

‘So, do you want to tell me why not?’ he asked Penny, as if there had been no interruption.

Penny took a deep breath and stuck as closely to the truth as she dared. ‘My father is in trouble and I need to go home and help him.’

Lucas said nothing for a moment, and the way he was looking at her was unnerving.

‘I told you about him, if you remember...’

‘Yes, I remember.’ He stood up from the desk and returned to his seat. ‘Okay I’ll give you a couple of weeks off to sort the problem out with your father. But then I need you back here.’ Lucas was flicking through some pages in his diary and he spoke like a man who was used to getting his own way. ‘I’ve got an extremely busy period towards the middle of next month. Can you be back by then?’ He glanced over at her sharply.

Penny hesitated, then inclined her head. There was no point in discussing this. She was booked on a flight to Arbuda tonight and she wouldn’t be coming back.

‘What time do you want me to take Isobel shopping?’ she asked instead.

Lucas glanced up. ‘I thought we’d finish early and collect her straight from school.’

‘Are you coming?’ she asked in surprise.

‘Of course I’m coming. You need someone to drive and carry shopping bags, don’t you?’ He grinned.

The phone rang again, and then went dead as Shauna answered it. ‘It’s the builder again,’ she called, a note of desperation in her voice.

Lucas snatched up the receiver. ‘Hi, John, how’s it going?’ he asked jovially. ‘Yeah, sorry about that—I was in a business meeting with a wayward member of staff.’ He glanced over at Penny with amusement lurking in his dark eyes.

Penny didn’t smile back. She was feeling desperately guilty for lying to Lucas, but he didn’t feel in the slightest bit guilty about what he was doing to her father. He said he didn’t like dishonesty of any kind, but what he was doing was downright wicked.

She scraped her chair back from the desk. The sooner she got away from him and forgot all about him the better.

CHAPTER TEN

ISOBEL spun around and around, her arms outstretched, the white dress billowing out around her legs, her dark hairs winging.

‘What do you think, Milly?’ she asked excitedly.

‘I think you are going to get dizzy and fall over. Stand still for a minute.’ Penny grinned.

The child did as she asked and the dress fell in soft folds around her. She looked like a little cherub. The ragged handkerchief hem was perfect and the short sleeves trimmed with strands of seed pearls looked just right. She lifted her face expectantly towards Penny, and her cheeks were rosy and her eyes shone as she gave a cheeky grin. ‘What do you think?’ she asked again.

‘I think you look like the most perfect fairy princess in the whole world.’ Penny smiled and then impulsively bent and kissed the child on her forehead.

Isobel threw her arms around her neck and hugged her. ‘Wait until Gina Fredrick sees this!’

‘She’ll be impressed,’ Penny agreed. ‘And I think your daddy will be impressed too.’

‘I am impressed,’ Lucas said from behind them, taking them both by surprise. He had poked his head around the door leading to the changing rooms and was looking down the corridor at them.

‘You’re not allowed in here, Daddy. It’s girls only,’ Isobel said, wagging a finger at him in disapproval.

‘It’s only the corridor, Isobel,’ Lucas said with a grin. ‘I don’t think I’ll see anything I shouldn’t. Come on out so I can look at the dress properly. I’m getting lonely out here.’

Dutifully Isobel trotted outside, into the main body of the shop, whereupon she caused quite a sensation with the assistants who came over to admire her in the dress.

‘She looks gorgeous, doesn’t she?’ Penny remarked quietly to Lucas as she stood next to him and watched the little girl twirling happily in front of the mirrors.

‘Yes, she does,’ Lucas agreed softly, and then grinned at Penny. ‘And you were right—that dress is definitely worth traipsing into every shop in town for.’

‘You are learning fast.’ Penny laughed. Lucas had been starting to flag as they had rejected one dress after another. In typical male fashion he had been ready to call it a day as they had tried shop after shop. But Penny had been determined that Isobel would get her dress today. She wanted to get on that plane tonight knowing that at least she had achieved something on her trip here...even if it was something as small as making a child happy.

‘You’ve got to have stamina when you go shopping with the girls,’ Penny said lightly. ‘Isn’t that right, Isobel?’

Isobel nodded happily.

‘Okay, you’ve made your point, but it’s time to eat now,’ Lucas said firmly. ‘There is a great little restaurant just down from here—’

‘But I haven’t got my wings yet, Daddy,’ Isobel said. ‘I can’t be a fairy princess without wings.’

‘I don’t think we will be able to buy them in a shop, Issy,’ Penny said. ‘Tell you what—we’ll find a haberdashery and buy some wire and some gossamer material and I’ll construct you a wonderful pair of wings.’

‘There’s no end to your talents, is there?’ Lucas remarked lightly.

‘Not really, no,’ Penny agreed with a teasing smile.

He smiled back, and as their eyes locked Penny felt her heart go into freefall. Hurriedly she looked away. She couldn’t allow herself to think how handsome he was...how much she wanted him. Because he was out of bounds. She could never have a relationship with Lucas Darien. A gnawing ache caught at her heart, but she firmly tried to ignore it, reminding herself instead that he had spent several hours at the office today looking into the business of evicting her father from his home.

‘When will you make my wings?’ Isobel asked anxiously.

‘I’ll do it tonight,’ Penny promised.

‘You don’t have to do it so soon. The play isn’t for another three weeks,’ Lucas told her.

‘Even so, it would be better to get it done now.’ Penny smiled at Isobel. ‘Then you can relax, knowing you are organised—isn’t that right?’

The child nodded happily.

‘Okay, well, as you are kindly going to create a costume for my daughter, how about I create some dinner for us back at home while you are busy?’ Lucas suggested.

Penny hesitated. Her plan had been to run the wings up in her hotel bedroom and then leave them by Lucas’s front door on her way out to the airport. But it seemed much more sensible to make them at his house and then just leave.

Penny nodded. ‘You’ve got yourself a deal.’

Half an hour later they arrived back at Lucas’s house, laden down with bags.

‘I don’t know about you, but I could use a drink,’ Lucas said as he put the shopping down in the kitchen.

‘You can’t take the pace, Daddy.’ Isobel giggled.

‘You’re right—I can’t.’ He smiled over at Penny. ‘How about a glass of wine?’

‘Thanks—I’d love one.’ Penny took the bag with Isobel’s dress in it and handed it over to the little girl. ‘Better go and hang that up before it gets creased.’

‘Yes, Milly,’ the child said happily.

‘Isobel?’ Penny stopped her as she ran towards the door. ‘You can call me Penny, if you like...because all my friends do.’

The child seemed to think about that for a moment. ‘I like the name Milly better,’ she said. ‘Can I still call you Milly?’

‘Yes, if you like,’ Penny said, puzzled by the request.

‘Good.’ The child smiled and ran out.

‘I wonder what is behind that,’ Lucas murmured.

‘Beats me.’ Penny shrugged. ‘Maybe she just thinks it’s a bit strange, calling me by a different name.’

‘I thought it was a bit strange myself,’ Lucas said, a glint of humour in his dark eyes.

‘Yes, well, I am sorry about that, Lucas,’ she said briskly.

‘That’s okay.’ He uncorked a bottle of white wine and for a moment the only sound was the plump glug of liquid as he filled two glasses. ‘I just hope you don’t mind if I slip occasionally and call you Milly myself.’ He passed the glass over to her and her hand brushed against his as she accepted it. The contact sent an immediate rush of adrenalin racing through her. ‘You see, I tend to think of you as Milly. Thoroughly modern Milly.’

She tried to pretend that she didn’t know what he was referring to, but the teasing, sexy tone of his voice sent her senses racing.

‘If you slip and call me Milly I won’t hold it against you,’ she assured him with a half-smile, trying to feign indifference. But when she met his eyes she felt her heart dip as if she had suddenly lost all sense of gravity. If only he knew, she thought poignantly, that there was nothing casual or modern about her feelings for him. That she had slept with him for the most age-old of reasons. She was in love with him.

He smiled and touched his glass against hers. ‘And thanks for helping out with Isobel today. I don’t know what we would have done without you.’

‘I’m sure you would have managed.’ She turned and tried to busy herself looking through the bags on the table. ‘Now, I suppose I should get on with Isobel’s costume.’

‘You can work in here on the table, if you’d like,’ he said, helping to clear a space for her by taking some of the bags away.

‘I don’t want to get in the way of your cooking,’ she said quickly, thinking it might be easier to concentrate on what she was doing if she was in another room from him.

‘Don’t worry—you won’t be in the way,’ he said with a grin. ‘And anyway, I could do with some moral support. I’m afraid my cooking is a little rusty. I actually burnt dinner last night, and we were only having hamburgers and salad.’

Penny smiled mischievously. ‘Was it the lettuce or the hamburgers that you burnt?’

‘Hey, I’m not that clueless.’ Lucas took off the jacket of his business suit and rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt. ‘And to prove it I shall create a masterpiece,’ he assured her. ‘I just want a witness, that’s all...’ He slanted a wry grin in her direction. ‘And maybe a bit of advice as I go along.’

‘You might be asking the wrong person,’ Penny joked. ‘My cooking isn’t that marvellous either.’

She busied herself emptying the material and the wire onto the table, trying not to notice how attractive Lucas looked. There was something about his casual informality and the teasing smile that just set her senses racing. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him loosening his tie to take it off. She noticed the strong column of his neck, the powerful forearms...

‘How’s Mrs Gordon?’ she asked, trying firmly to steer her mind away from dangerous ground.

‘She’s okay. I rang the hospital this morning and they said she’d had a comfortable night. The good news is that they are saying now she might not need surgery on her hip, that physiotherapy might fix her up. But she is going to have to take it easy for a few weeks.’

‘You’ll miss her.’

‘You’re not kidding.’ Lucas opened the fridge and took some vegetables out. ‘I’m going to take Isobel in to see her tomorrow night. Come with us, if you’d like.’

‘It might not be a good idea, Lucas,’ Penny answered carefully. ‘She might not be up to having so many visitors at once.’

‘Well, I’ll check and tell you tomorrow.’

She’d be back in Arbuda tomorrow, Penny thought bleakly. And she would probably never see Lucas or Isobel again.

‘How’s the repossession order going with the house on Arbuda?’ she asked him, firmly trying to concentrate on the reason why she couldn’t stay here. She had tried to monitor the situation as she continued to go through files today, but a lot of her work had taken her to the outer office. ‘You seemed to be on the phone a lot.’

‘That’s because there’s a lot to sort out.’

‘Has Salvador sent out the letter of eviction yet?’

‘You sound very disapproving, Penny.’ He paused by the table, and when she didn’t answer him or look over at him he reached out and put one finger under her chin, forcing her to look at him.

‘I am disapproving,’ she said cautiously. ‘I’ve told you that already.’

‘And I’ve told you it’s just business, Penny. Repossession isn’t pleasant, but it happens.’

She stepped back from him angrily. But she was angrier with herself than with him, because despite the unpleasant subject she felt a flare of sexual need inside her at the touch of his hand, the closeness of his body. The fact that she could still feel like that at the same time as talking about her father’s downfall was shocking, and she hated herself for it...but she just couldn’t seem to help herself.

‘Anyway, as you said before, we’ll agree to disagree about it, shall we?’ she said shakily, trying to cover up her emotions by starting to unravel the roll of netting on the table.

‘I suppose you feel strongly about this because you are worried about your own father and his financial problems,’ Lucas said suddenly.

The sentence caused her to look over at him sharply. Did he have any idea how close he was to the truth? she wondered, and her heart hammered wildly against her chest. ‘I feel strongly about it because I think what you are doing is wrong.’

‘For someone who has been...shall we say...economical with the truth, you can be quite sanctimonious, can’t you?’

She frowned. ‘Yes, well, I’ve said I’m sorry,’ she muttered shakily. ‘And I didn’t set out deliberately to lie or to hurt anybody.’

‘Look, Penny, my father left me a job to do and I’m doing it.’

And blood was thicker than water at the end of the day, she thought grimly. If she told him his father was a cheat it would not further the cause of softening his attitude in any way. She was frankly wasting her time.

Luckily at that moment Isobel ran back into the room. ‘What are we having for dinner, Daddy?’ she asked happily.

‘Stir-fried vegetables and steak.’

‘Can I have chips?’

‘No, you can’t.’ Lucas said.

Isobel made a face. ‘Daddy burnt dinner last night,’ she told Penny as she climbed up on the stool next to her. ‘It tasted horrible.’

‘Yes, thank you, snitch.’ Lucas ruffled her hair and she grinned.

There was silence for a while as Lucas carried on with the preparations for the meal and Isobel watched Penny. She had probably gone too far in her condemnation of him, she thought as she snipped the wire to size. She wondered if it was her imagination or was there a bit of an atmosphere between them now?

‘Do you like my daddy?’ Isobel asked Penny suddenly.

The question took Penny very much by surprise. ‘Well...yes...’

‘He likes you too,’ she said happily. ‘Don’t you, Daddy?’

Penny glanced over at Lucas and met his eyes. Whereas she felt deeply embarrassed by the line of questioning, he merely looked amused. ‘Yes—well, most of the time anyway. I could have done without the surprise this morning.’

‘What surprise?’ Isobel asked.

‘Never you mind.’ Lucas turned off the stove. ‘I’m going to serve dinner now. How long will you be, Penny?’

‘I’m just about finished.’ Penny glued the last piece of net in place.

‘We’ll adjourn to the dining room, then. Come and help me lay the table, Issy.’

Lucas was just in the process of carrying the food through to the other room when the phone rang. ‘Will you pick that up for me, Penny?’ he called back over his shoulder. ‘Tell whoever it is I’ll call them back after dinner.’

It was Emma, and she sounded distinctly put out when she heard Penny’s voice answering the phone. ‘You’re working late,’ she remarked stiffly.

‘I was just helping Isobel with a costume for her school play,’ Penny told her.

‘I see.’

‘Lucas is just in the process of preparing dinner—can he ring you back, Emma?’

‘I just wanted to tell him that Maria has gone into labour. Salvador took her into hospital this afternoon.’

‘That’s great news. Although she is a bit early, isn’t she? I hope everything goes okay for them.’

‘Yes, so do I. Oh, and will you tell Lucas that I said thank you for the beautiful bouquet of flowers? Tell him they were fabulous. I’ll call him tomorrow—I’m just on my way to the cinema now.’

‘Okay, I’ll tell him.’ Penny put the phone down thoughtfully. If Lucas was sending Emma flowers did that mean he wanted to get back with her? She tried to tell herself that it would probably be a good thing if he did. It would mean he had finally put the past and Kay behind him, and Isobel clearly needed a mother figure in her life.

‘Penny, your dinner is getting cold,’ Lucas called through from the other room.

‘Sorry about that,’ she said as she went through and took her seat at the candlelit table opposite to Lucas. ‘That was Emma; she said that Maria has gone into labour. Salvador is with her at the hospital.’

Lucas grinned. 'Well, that's exciting news. I hope she has an easy time and it all goes well.'

'Yes, so do I.' Penny looked down at the food in front of her. 'This looks very nice.'

'Chips would have been better,' Isobel piped in. 'They are my favourite. Chips and tomato sauce.'

'My daughter has a wonderful taste in fine cuisine, don't you think, Penny?' Lucas said with a shake of his head.

'She certainly does.' Penny winked at Isobel, and then returned her attention to Lucas. 'Oh, and Emma said to say thank you for the flowers. She said they were fabulous. She'll ring you tomorrow; she's going to the cinema tonight.'

Lucas nodded. 'I'm glad she liked them,' he said casually.

Penny pushed the food around on her plate. She had been feeling hungry earlier, but now her appetite seemed to have completely deserted her. The thought of Lucas with Emma was like a knife twisting inside her. The fact that she knew she was being ridiculous just made it all the worse. She was leaving Puerto Rico. There was no way a relationship between her and Lucas would ever work out. Even if he did forgive her for lying to him—and that was a big if—it would certainly break her father's heart if he found out she was involved with Lawrence Darien's son. The whole situation was a complete no-go.

'How's my cooking?' Lucas asked, reaching over to top up her wine glass.

'Surprisingly good.' She smiled over at him. It was a lovely meal; it was just a pity she couldn't enjoy it. 'Mrs Gordon would be proud of you.'

'It's raining, Daddy,' Isobel said suddenly. They all looked towards the window. A torrential tropical downpour was almost obscuring the greenery of the garden.

'Wow! I hope that doesn't stay around for long, otherwise I'll get soaked just running into the hotel.'

'You can always stay here tonight,' Lucas suggested.

The invitation was issued in a casual way but it sent Penny's senses into wild disarray. 'No, I'll be fine, Lucas,' she said hastily. But she couldn't bring herself to look across at him as she replied. Was he inviting her to share his bed again? Or was he simply offering her the spare room? She wasn't sure. But whichever it was she had to remain strong and refuse.

'In fact, I'll help you clear these dishes away and then I really must ring for a taxi. I've got a few phone calls I want to make from my hotel.' She forced herself to say the words, and to sound cool and practical, even though the thought of sleeping with him again was making her blood thunder through her veins with excitement and longing.

'Fair enough.' Lucas nodded his head.

'Daddy, can I be excused now?' Isobel asked.

Lucas glanced down the table, checking how much of her dinner she had eaten. 'Okay. But it's getting late now, Issy, so you have to start getting ready for bed.'

'Will you come and tuck me in?' Isobel asked.

'Don't I always?' Lucas said with a smile.

'No, I meant Milly...will you tuck me in tonight, Milly?'

'If you like,' Penny agreed softly, touched by the child's request.

'Meantime, it's into the shower with you,' Lucas said as he got to his feet and started to clear the dishes from the table.

'I'll do this, Lucas. You see to Isobel,' Penny said, standing up to help him.

'Thanks, Penny.'

As father and daughter disappeared upstairs Penny carried the dishes through to the kitchen. She could hear Isobel's laughter drifting down and it made her smile as she stacked the dishwasher.

What would it be like to be a part of their lives? she wondered. To live here as a family? If only she didn't know anything about Lawrence Darien...if only she was here for all the right reasons instead of all the wrong ones. She allowed herself to daydream for a little while and watched the rain outside. It was coming down in thunderous sheets, bouncing off the steps that led up to the veranda.

Flint ambled up to the back door and distracted her as he started whining to get out. 'Are you sure you want to go out there?' Penny asked him. 'It's pretty grim.'

The dog whined again, so she opened the door. Flint took a step back as he saw the rain. 'I did try to warn you.' Penny smiled.

After a moment's hesitation the dog wandered out onto the porch, and a few seconds later he ventured down the steps into the garden. The rain was so heavy it obscured him from view as soon as he had walked a few yards. Penny could hardly even see the car on the drive—it was just a blur of colour against the green grass.

'Flint, come on, boy. Better come back in,' Penny called. But there was no sign of the animal. She stepped out onto the porch. 'Flint!' she called again.

The light was fading now, and darkness was dropping fast. The smell of rain was fresh and heavy in the air, and although it was still warm it was a more bearable temperature than it had been all day.

Penny leaned against the railing and took deep breaths.

'Pleasant out here when it rains, isn't it?' Lucas said from behind her.

She turned and found him watching her from the doorway. 'Yes, it's fresh and quite exhilarating, isn't it? I was just waiting for Flint—he very bravely headed out into the garden.'

'He likes the coolness of this weather.' Lucas walked over to stand beside her. 'I like it myself. It's as if everything is being washed clean, isn't it?'

There was silence for a while, except for the rumble of rain on the roof over their heads. Penny watched as it fell like a watery blanket, enclosing them from the darkness of the world outside.

'Shall we forget our disagreement earlier?' he asked suddenly.

She nodded.

'I don't really think you are sanctimonious. Just a bit irritating and stubborn at times.' He grinned.

'Stubborn?' She turned and looked at him with a raised eyebrow. 'How do you arrive at that conclusion?'

'Well, you won't admit that I'm right—which, of course, I nearly always am,' he said teasingly.

'You wish.' Penny shook her head and looked away from him.

'Penny?'

She looked over at him questioningly.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes—why?’

‘You just looked so serious for a moment.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Good...I’m glad we are still friends.’ The half teasing smile made her heart dip crazily. Maybe here in this house they were friends, but outside in the real world he could never be anything other than her father’s enemy. As she looked into his eyes she found herself wishing that they could stay like this for ever, cocooned from reality, that time could stand still and she wouldn’t have to leave.

Flint came hurrying back up the steps to the veranda, and then, before they could move out of his way, shook himself vigorously. ‘Flint!’ they both shouted in dismay as water flew all over them in icy droplets.

‘Thanks a bunch, fella,’ Lucas said, brushing himself down.

Flint looked up at him with unconcerned eyes and shook himself again, which made Penny laugh because she had wisely moved further away.

‘Very funny.’ Lucas looked over at her and smiled wryly. ‘Look at me—I’m soaked!’ He brushed at his white shirt, which was now sticking to him in damp patches.

‘That will teach you to think you are always right,’ Penny said, laughing again.

‘Hey, take that back immediately. I expect a little more meekness and subordination from my employees,’ he said laughingly.

‘Then I think you’ve got the wrong employee,’ she said with a grin.

‘You might be right.’ He advanced towards her, a wicked light of indignation in his eyes.

‘Anyway, I’d better go and tuck Isobel up,’ she said with a smile as she backed away from him.

‘Oh, no, you don’t...’ He caught up with her before she had reached the door and put a hand on the wall behind her, effectively trapping her close to him. ‘Before I let you escape I think an apology might be in order.’

‘An apology for what?’ She smiled. ‘Siding with Flint?’

‘No, an apology for being volatile and difficult.’

‘Difficult! You’re the difficult one.’ She raised her chin slightly.

‘Last chance—you’d better start saying you are sorry, otherwise I just might have to kiss you senseless.’ His eyes moved towards her lips and suddenly the mood between them changed dramatically. The laughter and the teasing disappeared, replaced by a powerful surge of sexual awareness.

She moistened her lips nervously; her heart was racing out of control. She wanted him to kiss her... wanted him so much it was as if every inch, every nerve in her body was crying out for him.

As he lowered his head she closed her eyes. The touch of his lips against hers was electric; it sent shivery waves of delight shooting through her. She reached her hands up tentatively and rested them against his shoulders, then slid them higher around his neck and kissed him back with heated passion.

All coherent thought slipped away in those few moments of ecstasy. She felt his hands around her waist and longed for them to caress her, longed to get even closer into his arms.

The sound of the rain seemed to drown out all the voices inside her that said this was wrong.

He was the one to pull back from her, leaving her breathless and filled with a gnawing ache of need inside.

‘I suppose we shouldn’t have done that,’ she whispered unsteadily.

‘Why not?’ He smiled at her.

‘Because...’ *Because this was wrong*, her mind screamed. *Because she was lying to him about who she was and they could never have a relationship in any real sense...* The knowledge washed through her in cold waves of torment. ‘Because...this will complicate our working relationship,’ she finished weakly. ‘And, anyway, didn’t you just send Emma some flowers? Do you really think it’s right to kiss me and pursue her at the same time?’

He smiled. ‘Are you jealous, by any chance?’

‘No, of course not.’ The arrogant question set her blood on fire. But the annoying thing was that he was right. She was jealous of Emma even though she had no earthly right to be.

‘Anyway, I’d better go...’ She ducked away from him, under his arm. ‘I don’t want to keep Isobel waiting. Will you ring for a taxi for me while I tuck her in?’

‘If that’s what you want.’

It wasn’t what she wanted; she looked over at him and felt as if her heart was truly breaking. Then hurriedly she went inside.

Isobel was cuddled down beneath the sheets, her teddy bear held tight in her arms. Penny sat down on the bed beside her.

‘Thanks for coming shopping with me, Milly,’ she said.

‘I enjoyed it,’ Penny said truthfully. ‘And you looked gorgeous in your dress.’

The child nodded. ‘I got the best dress in the whole world,’ she said solemnly.

‘I think you did,’ Penny agreed with a smile. She reached out and tenderly stroked a stray strand of hair back from the little girl’s face, and as she did so the knowledge that this wasn’t goodnight but goodbye swamped her with sadness. ‘I’m sure you will be the most beautiful girl in the play.’ She bent and kissed her on the forehead. ‘Now, time for sleep.’

‘Milly, will you come and see me in my play?’ The child asked suddenly, before she could stand up.

Penny bit down on her lip. ‘I don’t think I can, Isobel.’

‘Why?’ A frown creased the smooth lines of the child’s forehead.

‘Because...’ Penny paused, and then decided it was best to tell the little girl the truth. ‘I have to go home and see my dad for a while because he needs me.’

‘Oh!’ Isobel looked as if she might cry suddenly.

‘But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to come, Issy,’ Penny said gently. ‘Given the chance I would love to see you in your school play. But sometimes things just aren’t possible. I’m worried about my dad, you see, because he’s on his own. You do understand, don’t you?’

Isobel nodded. ‘Like me and my daddy?’

‘Yes. A bit like that.’ Penny smiled at her. ‘But I will be thinking about you and wondering how you are getting on.’

‘I’ll think about you too,’ Isobel said, and cuddled further down next to her teddy bear.

‘Shall I switch off this light?’ Penny asked as she moved away.

‘No...I like the light on.’ The child’s eyes were growing heavy now. ‘See you tomorrow, Milly.’

‘Goodnight, Isobel. Sweet dreams.’ As she crept from the room she saw Lucas standing in the shadows outside the doorway.

‘Why won’t you be here for her play?’ he asked quietly as he closed the door behind her.

‘I told you—I’ve got to go home.’ She started to move away from him towards the stairs. She really felt that she needed to get out of here fairly quickly—because if she didn’t she might start crying. Saying goodbye to Isobel had been even harder than she had expected. But before she could move very far Lucas caught hold of her arm.

‘You know Isobel’s play isn’t for another three weeks,’ he said crisply. ‘I thought you said you’d be back by then?’

‘Is it three weeks away?’ Penny feigned puzzlement. ‘Well, then, I probably will make it. I just didn’t want to make promises I might not be able to keep.’

He pulled her around so that she was forced to look at him. ‘But you don’t mind making promises to me that you can’t keep?’ His eyes moved searchingly over her face. ‘What is going on, Penny?’

‘I told you—I’m worried about my father.’

‘And that’s all?’

‘It’s enough...believe me.’ For a moment her voice was unsteady, and her eyes lingered on his mouth for longer than they should have. ‘Did you ring for a taxi for me?’

‘What do you think?’ he murmured dryly.

‘I think you should have done,’ she said huskily, but at the same time she could feel herself swaying closer towards him.

‘No, you don’t. You think that we have some unfinished business.’

‘Down in the office, you mean? Looking through those files...?’ She tried to make light of the situation. ‘Emma is right about you. You’ve got a one-track mind for business...’

He ignored the flippant statement and instead leaned closer and touched his lips against hers, tasting her as if she were some rare delicacy that needed savouring. The sensations that flowed through her were bittersweet. She wanted him so much.

‘My one-track mind at the moment is firmly focused on you...’ he murmured as he pulled back fractionally. ‘And don’t tell me you don’t want me to do this...because I know that you do...you want me as badly as I want you.’

The arrogant confidence of his words was punctuated by the feel of his hands as they moved over her body with assured, masterful strokes. She told herself that she should push him away, but she couldn’t. His caresses were sending her body wild with need. She wanted so much more. He was right—she did want him as much as he wanted her.

He bent to take possession of her lips again, and she kissed him back with hungry approval. She felt his hands moving to undress her; the zip at the back of her dress was pulled down, his hand moving beneath to

find the cool softness of her skin.

Then he lifted her up and carried her through to the bedroom.

‘Now, where were we...?’ he said as he placed her down on the bed.

Even as she was telling herself that this was wrong she was reaching to unbutton his shirt with feverish fingers. What difference would one more night make? she asked herself weakly. She just wanted to feel his body against her, relish the heady bliss of his kisses and his caresses one last time. Was that really so wrong? Then she would walk away and put this episode in her life behind her—forget it as best she could...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PENNY lay in the warm circle of Lucas's arms, her head against his chest, listening to the steady sound of his breathing, the regular beat of his heart. Their passion had been wild and gloriously fulfilling; now, sleepy and sated, they lay wrapped in each other's arms. Outside the rain was still thundering down in relentless torrents. To Penny it sounded like tumultuous applause—probably the heavens' sarcastic approval for another spectacular mistake, she thought with dry irony. She should never have stayed; all she had succeeded in doing was proving to herself how much she loved him, how much she was giving up by walking away.

She would never be able to forget Lucas...never. Turning her head slightly, she looked at the illuminated numbers on the alarm clock next to the bed. If she was to have any chance of catching her flight she would have to leave now.

'Lucas?' She whispered his name, her voice husky in the darkness.

There was no reply.

Cautiously she pulled away from him. His arm tightened around her for a moment and she stopped, fearing he had woken up. But the pattern of his breathing didn't alter. She slipped out from his arms and then looked back at him. The light from the landing was slanting over the bed; the covers were low on his waist, revealing the powerful shoulders, the broad chest. But it was his face that held her attention. She drank in the lean, handsome features for one last time.

Then impulsively she leaned over and kissed him on the lips. He smiled sleepily and reached out, stroking his hand through the silky softness of her hair, pulling her in close against him. For a moment she allowed herself one last luxury of being held by him. Then, taking a deep breath, she moved away.

He didn't stir. Hurriedly she picked up her clothes from the floor, searching under the bed for a shoe that was mysteriously missing. She found it after a few frantic minutes and then tiptoed quietly away.

She got dressed in the lounge at the same time as phoning for a taxi. Then she spent an anxious half an hour waiting for it to arrive whilst penning a short note to Lucas, which she put on the hall table by the phone. It was almost ten by the time she left, closing the door quietly behind her. She had a last glimpse of Lucas's house through the rain-splattered windows of the taxi as it pulled away.

Then she turned and stared resolutely in front of her at the darkness of the country roads. Her father needed her, and her first loyalty had to be to him. There could be no more looking back now. Lucas and Isobel were in the past.

Her flight was delayed, which was good news because otherwise she might have missed it. She arrived at the airport with minutes to spare, but ended up spending nearly the whole night in the departure lounge, staring up at the screens.

It was daylight when she finally touched down in Arbuda. It felt really weird, coming out of the familiar terminal into the heat of the morning. Nothing much changed on this small island—it was as if time had stood still and she had never been away. Even the same taxi drivers sat outside, smoking and laughing as they waited for a fare.

As she climbed into the taxi that would take her on the last leg of her journey she felt tired and edgy. She leaned back and closed her eyes, and memories of Lucas making love to her filtered through her mind. His hands on her body, his lips heated and passionate against hers. What would he think when he woke this morning to find her gone? When he read her note telling him she wouldn't be back and that she was sorry?

She squeezed her eyes tight in an effort not to think about it. At least he would never find out how she had deceived him and who she really was...She had made sure all traces of her name had been scrubbed out of the hotel register before she left. The woman receptionist had been very understanding when she had told her she was running away from a possessive boyfriend and didn't want him to trace her. The man who worked there had looked rather more suspicious when she had said the same thing to him earlier that morning, but she had slipped him a few dollars and he had nodded and shrugged his shoulders. And as they had never had her Arbuda address anyway, just her Miami base address for work, she supposed that her secret was now safe.

Not that Lucas would give her a lot of thought. He'd probably be more bothered that she had left him in the lurch at work than anything else.

As she opened her eyes the taxi pulled into the driveway of her father's house. She noticed the sugar cane was still in the fields.

The house came into view after a few minutes. It looked sadly neglected—the railing to the front door was hanging off and the blue paint that had once looked so pretty on the shutters was fading.

'Have you seen anything of my father recently, Joshua?' Penny asked, leaning forwards to talk to the taxi driver.

'No, miss. He had to lay off some of his labourers, and I heard from Mrs Gillingham that he's been in a bad way. She's been bringing him in a little of her chicken soup, trying to do her best for him.'

Penny's heart missed a beat. If her father was accepting Mrs Gillingham's help he must indeed be in a bad way. Mrs Gillingham was her father's neighbour, a kindly widow who sometimes popped over to see him—much to his annoyance. He couldn't stick her, and complained loudly about her being a very annoying woman.

'Thanks, Joshua.' As soon as the taxi pulled to a halt she jumped out and paid him, and practically ran up to the front door.

'Dad?' she called loudly as she walked through the front door. The place looked surprisingly clean and tidy. Usually when she came home on leave she spent her time cleaning and organising. 'Dad, are you okay?'

The door through to the kitchen opened and Mrs Gillingham came out. She was a plump woman in her sixties, with a pleasant smiling face. 'Oh, it's you, dear; I wondered what the commotion was. Your father is upstairs in his bed. He had an accident a couple of days ago—'

'What kind of an accident? Is he okay?' Penny asked in consternation.

'He had a car crash and broke his leg. Poor man has been in a bit of a state.'

'Oh, no! Thanks, Mrs Gillingham.' Penny took the stairs two at a time to go up and see him.

She found him lying on top of the patchwork counter-pane in his bedroom reading a newspaper. He put it down as she came in and she was shocked to see how frail he looked. All colour had gone from his face and he had lost a lot of weight in the few months since she had last been home.

'Dad, are you okay?' She went over to put her arms around him.

He smiled tenderly at her as she pulled back. 'I'm all the better for seeing you. Where have you been? I tried to get in contact with you via your company and they said you were off on leave.'

'I had a bit of business to deal with,' Penny said guiltily. 'You could have phoned me on my mobile.'

'I've lost the number—don't know what the heck I've done with my address book.'

'Oh, Dad, what am I going to do with you?'

‘Worse than that, I think I’ve lost the house, Penny,’ he said sadly.

‘Have you received the eviction order?’

Her father shook his head. ‘But it’s only a matter of time. I can’t afford these massive repayments that Darien insisted on. And I’ve had to lay off workers, which means I won’t get the sugar crop in time, which means I’m even further behind.’

‘I’m sorry, Dad,’ Penny said softly, her heart going out to him.

‘It’s not your fault.’ He smiled sadly. ‘It’s my own, for getting involved with Lawrence Darien. That man never forgave me for stealing your mother away from him.’

‘Well, you didn’t exactly steal her. She found out he was married and finished with him.’

William Kennedy inclined his head. ‘But she found out he was married because I told her.’ His lips twisted wryly. ‘I played a bit dirty, I suppose.’

‘He was still married—he was the one playing dirty.’

‘Well, whatever...He never did forgive me. And now it seems his son is just as cold as he was.’

Penny thought about Lucas. ‘Cold’ wasn’t how she would ever describe him. ‘You don’t really know that for a fact, Dad.’

Her father looked at her with sceptical eyes. ‘That guy is a chip off the old block. If I ever saw him I’d —’ For a moment her father’s face seemed to heat up to a shade of purple that wasn’t healthy.

‘Now, now, William...’ Mrs Gillingham strolled in with a tray. ‘You’re not upsetting yourself, are you?’ She put the tray down beside him and reached to plump up the pillows at his back.

‘Don’t fuss, woman,’ he said with agitation. ‘I’m fine.’

‘No, you’re not—you are getting your blood pressure up for no reason at all.’

‘Your blood pressure would be up if you were losing your house,’ William muttered.

Rona Gillingham rolled her eyes at Penny. ‘You just concentrate on eating that sandwich and getting well. I’ll pop back later to see how you are going on.’

‘I’ll be fine now that Penny is here,’ William said in a low tone.

‘Well, I’ll pop in later anyway.’ With a smile, the woman retreated.

‘Thanks, Mrs Gillingham,’ Penny called after her, but she had already gone.

‘You shouldn’t be so tetchy, Dad. You are very lucky to have such a nice neighbour,’ she said crossly as she passed him over his tray.

‘She’s never been away from here, you know...morning, noon and night.’ He reached to pick up the sandwich on the tray, then added softly. ‘Fine woman, though...fine woman.’

‘Dad?’ Penny looked over at him in surprise and then smiled. ‘There’s life in the old dog yet, isn’t there? Despite that plaster on your leg.’

Her father grinned. ‘If I could just forget about Darien I’d be happy,’ he muttered dryly.

‘I don’t think there is much chance of that, Dad. But I’m home now, and I have another few weeks leave ahead of me. I’ll help you pack everything up.’

‘You will not. I’m not packing anything until I have to.’ William leaned back against the pillows. ‘But if you’d organise the remainder of my workforce to help bring the sugar in, I’d be very grateful. Who knows? We might get the harvest in on time after all.’

‘You mean if I work day and night?’ Penny looked over at him and shook her head.

‘Oh, go on, Pen...for your dear old dad. Just think—we might be able to teach that Darien ogre a thing or two after all, like don’t underestimate a Kennedy.’

Despite the breeze, the temperature was sizzling. Penny had brought drinks down to the workers in the fields, and now she sat down in the field of sugar cane and looked up at the blue sky.

It was nearly two weeks now since she had left Puerto Rico, and surprisingly no eviction notice had arrived. In fact, no communication from Lucas had arrived at all. Planning permission would be revoked in two days. She wondered what on earth was going on. Had something happened to Lucas? Maybe he was ill...? Maybe Isobel was ill and everything was just forgotten as he dealt with the problem?

She closed her eyes and tried to rid herself of the idea that had been lurking in the cold depths of her thoughts for a few days now. Lucas would be fine...and so would Isobel, she tried to reassure herself. They would probably hear from him today, and by tomorrow a JCB would arrive to start digging foundations.

A breeze rustled through the sugar cane around her. God, she missed him...Every day she thought of him, remembered the way he had kissed her, held her...looked at her. As a treat she allowed herself to conjure him up in her mind, tall and lithe, with those powerful shoulders. She remembered how it had felt to be held in the tenderness of his embrace. The way he’d half smiled sometimes, and the way he’d watched her with those dark, incredibly sexy eyes.

There was the sound of a car pulling up by the gates further down from her. Penny didn’t stand up to investigate. She was dreamily imagining she was lying in Lucas’s arms.

Somebody got out of the car and called to one of the workmen standing nearby.

‘Afternoon—I’m looking for the William Kennedy residence.’

The familiar husky timbre of the voice made Penny’s heart stop beating for an instant. It sounded like Lucas! Was she conjuring him up so vividly in her mind that she was imagining his voice?

She sat up, and through the dense screen of sugar cane she could just make out a tall man standing by the side of the road. He had his back to her, but he had a similar build to Lucas and dark hair. He was wearing khaki trousers and a matching short-sleeved shirt.

She saw her co-worker Matthew pointing up the drive towards her father’s house. The man turned to get back in his car, and Penny felt the world tip at a dizzying crazy angle as she realised it was indeed Lucas Darien. For a moment she was just so incredibly pleased to see him that she couldn’t think of anything else. But as he got back into the red sports car and turned up the drive her brain suddenly started to click into gear again.

What on earth did he want? Was he coming to take possession of the property in person, rather than sending in the bailiffs? The notion made fear zing through her veins. That would be enough to give her father a heart attack.

She scrambled quickly to her feet to try and stop him, but she was too late. He had already driven past her, leaving a white trail of dust in his wake.

‘Matthew!’ She called across to her colleague as he turned his attention back to lancing through the cane. ‘What did that man want?’

‘He was looking for your father. Has some business with him.’ Matthew shook his head. ‘He didn’t say what it was about.’

‘Damn!’ Penny took a deep breath. She was going to have to get back to the house, and quick. Only trouble was their other colleague Jim had just driven off with the truck ten minutes earlier. There was nothing else for it—she had to set off at a run up the drive. She took a shortcut across the fields halfway up, but it still took her half an hour to reach the house.

Just in time to see Lucas driving off looking rather grim-faced. He didn’t see her, however; he was too busy turning the car before heading back down the drive.

Penny entered the house, her heart racing, her mouth dry with fear as she wondered what kind of state she would find her father in.

He was sitting in the lounge, staring out of the window with a strangely silent look about him.

‘Dad?’ Penny approached cautiously. ‘What was that all about? Is everything all right?’

‘Hmm?’ William Kennedy looked over at his daughter with a faraway expression on his face.

‘Was that Lucas Darien?’

‘Yes...very strange...’

‘What’s strange?’ Penny came closer. ‘What happened, Dad?’

‘He apologised to me.’ Her father raised his eyes towards hers. ‘Can you believe it? Told me that he was calling off his solicitor and that the house was mine.’

Penny sat down on the adjacent chair, her legs weak with relief. ‘Why?’

‘Seems when he was going through his father’s files he found a codicil to the will. Lawrence had had second thoughts about pursuing his vendetta against me.’ William held up a letter. ‘He’d even left a letter for me, written to me on his deathbed, telling me he regretted his actions...that he had been obsessed with Clara and had never got over losing her...’

‘Really?’ Penny was stunned. ‘What did Lucas say?’

‘Well, he hadn’t read the letter. It was sealed and addressed to me, and he said he felt he should deliver it in person. He also handed me a cheque to cover my losses and he apologised profusely.’ William shrugged. ‘I was going to make a fuss—tell him what I thought...but I found I couldn’t because...Well, he is a very decent chap, actually...who’d have thought it...eh?’

‘Did he mention me?’ Penny asked, her heart thundering nervously.

‘You?’ William frowned. ‘Why would he mention you?’

Why, indeed, when he didn’t even know of her connection here? Penny bit down on her lip. ‘I didn’t tell you, Dad, but I went to see him.’

Her father looked at her as if only just seeing her for the first time. ‘Oh!’ Then he smiled. ‘Is he the reason you’ve been looking so damn miserable these last few weeks?’

Penny nodded.

‘Well, you’d better get after him, hadn’t you? He’s staying in town tonight, at the Sheraton hotel. He leaves first thing tomorrow morning.’

Penny scrambled to her feet and ran out of the room. It was only when she got into the hall that she caught sight of herself in the mirror. She was wearing faded blue jeans and a rather clingy old white T-shirt.

Maybe she had better change first, she thought.

It was strange whilst she was showering and changing and getting ready to go after Lucas. Her adrenalin was running high with feverish excitement. It was only after she had parked her father's battered old pick-up truck a few blocks down from the swish hotel building that she started to have doubts...that excitement turned to nerves.

Going after Lucas was all very well, but just say he wasn't interested...Maybe he hadn't even missed her. He might even be back with Emma by now.

She stepped out of the car and brushed a nervous hand down over her blue dress. What should she say to him? Even though he had discovered the truth about his father it couldn't be easy for him. He probably wasn't in the best of moods, and finding out that she was William Kennedy's daughter might really infuriate him.

The sun was setting in a flamingo-pink sky as Penny walked slowly up to the front entrance to the hotel. Gold lights illuminated the impressive lobby. It's now or never, Penny told herself firmly. If she didn't go in and talk to Lucas she would always wonder about what might have been.

As she walked in towards the reception desk a man walked out from one of the lounges and preceded her to the desk. Penny was so busy rehearsing in her mind what she would say to Lucas that she didn't pay him much attention.

It was only when the receptionist smiled and said, 'Evening, Mr Darien,' that Penny realised it was Lucas, who was now standing with his back to her a few yards away.

'Evening, Dominique—any messages for me?' He sounded his usual nonchalant self, but just the deep, familiar resonances of his tone made Penny's emotions dissolve with longing.

'Two phone calls, sir.' The woman handed across a piece of paper from one of the pigeonholes behind him.

'Thanks.' Smiling, Lucas turned—and that was when his gaze connected with Penny's.

The first thing Penny noted was the look of complete surprise in his dark eyes.

'Penny—what the heck are you doing here?' he grated, a raw tone to his voice.

'I live here,' she said quietly 'I—'

'What? In the Sheraton Hotel, Arbuda?' he said sarcastically. 'What do you do? Skip around the Caribbean using different aliases for different islands?'

'Don't be silly—'

'Silly?' His eyes narrowed on her and she realised she had said the wrong thing. He advanced slowly and with each step she felt her heart thudding with nerves. There was no mistaking the fact that he was angry with her...blazing, in fact. 'What the hell are you playing at? Have you any idea how I felt when I found that damn note you left?'

'I had to go, Lucas...' She shook her head helplessly.

'Without even a word?' He shook his head and then he grabbed hold of her arm, his fingers squeezing into her skin.

'I tried to tell you I had to leave, but you didn't want to listen—'

'Well, I'm listening now.' He marched her firmly across the foyer.

'Where are we going?'

‘We’re going somewhere private, where you can explain yourself.’ He stopped by the lifts and pushed a button for the doors to open. Then he marched her into the mirrored interior.

Another couple stepped in beside them just as the door was about to close. There was silence as the elevator swept smoothly up towards the top floor. Surreptitiously Penny studied Lucas in the smoked mirrors. She had never seen him look so tense. Even on the morning when Mildred Bancroft arrived he hadn’t seemed this formidable!

The lift stopped and the other couple got out. They continued upwards.

‘Lucas, will you let go of me?’ she murmured, looking down at the hand on her arm.

‘I don’t feel like letting go of you,’ he grated. ‘You’ve got some explaining to do.’ The doors swished open and he steered her outside into the long, empty corridor.

‘Look, I know I’ve got explaining to do—that’s why I’m here... You don’t need to frog-march me like this.’

But still Lucas didn’t let go of her. She watched as he put a security card into one of the doors and pushed it open. Then they walked in to a sumptuous apartment. It had gold carpets and deep sofas in heavy brocade material. There were double patio doors at one end, that were open to a balcony overlooking the velvet darkness of the Caribbean Sea. The tranquil scene, bathed by the silvery light of a full moon, was very much at odds with the tense atmosphere between them in the room.

‘Okay, you said you wanted to explain—now explain,’ Lucas said tersely as he released her.

‘Lucas, don’t belike this.’ She rubbed at her arm absently.

‘How do you expect me to be?’ His eyes were cold.

She pushed a shaking hand through her long blonde hair. ‘You’ve got every right to be angry, I know that.’

‘Good.’ His eyes flicked over her, taking in the high heels, the tanned long legs and the stylish way her dress emphasised the perfect proportions of her figure. ‘Because I’m not just angry, I’m furious. So where the hell have you been?’

‘I told you I had to come home, that my father needed me.’ There was a heartbeat of a pause before she added softly, ‘My father is William Kennedy. You came to see him today. I’m Penny Kennedy.’

‘You are William Kennedy’s daughter?’ His eyes narrowed on her face in a moment of disbelief.

‘Yes.’ She sat down on the arm of one of the sofas. ‘The real reason I came to see you in Puerto Rico was to beg for some leniency for my father.’ She flicked an uncertain glance over at him to see how he was taking this, but it was hard to tell. It was as if shutters had come down across his features, leaving just a steely aloofness.

‘I never intended to stay...or to deceive you,’ she added quickly. ‘It was just when you accused my dad of being a no-hoper...a useless reprobate—’

‘I never said that,’ Lucas cut in, his tone heavy.

‘You may as well have.’ She glanced over at him. ‘It was what you thought, and it made me so damned mad.’

‘Indeed,’ Lucas murmured coolly.

‘Anyway...’ Penny carried on uncertainly, flicking an imaginary crease from her dress, not able to look at him properly now. ‘When you told me you had to find the deeds to the property before the end of the

month I had this idea that if I could find them first it would stop the building work, and also give my father more time to make an interim payment and take some of the pressure off.'

'So you were doing a bit of conservation work as well as a bit of spying for your father?' he grated sardonically.

'Come on, Lucas, give me a break here.' She glanced over at him pleadingly. 'In the end I didn't do anything wrong...In fact, I was more of a help than a hindrance—you've got to admit that.'

'Do I?' Lucas shook his head. 'On the contrary, I think you have been a damned hindrance.'

She bit down on her lip. 'Well, I am sorry you feel like that...but what you were doing was wrong—'

'I was simply following the terms of my father's will. He had made me an executor and I was fulfilling my final obligation to him.'

'Yes, well, your motives weren't completely altruistic; you did stand to make a lot of money from the sale of my father's property to a builder.'

'Is that what you think of me? That my main concern is money?' His voice was cold.

Penny frowned. 'No...' She admitted softly. 'It's not what I think of you at all.'

'You've got to understand, Penny, that my father and I never really saw eye to eye. I knew he was a womaniser...knew also that he had indulged in some shady deals over the years. But we had patched up our differences before he died and I was glad of that.' Lucas pushed a hand through the darkness of his hair. 'He apologised to me before he died, said how much he regretted some of his actions. He asked me to take charge of his business affairs, said he wanted to leave most of his fortune to me. When I said I didn't want it or need it, he said that I was to accept it for Isobel. That he wanted to make amends for not being around much for her.' He shrugged helplessly. 'What could I say to that? So I agreed, and I tried to do everything strictly by the book. I got rid of his shady solicitor, looked into every aspect of his finances. I had no idea that the repossession order was a personal matter.'

'I know you didn't.'

He met her eyes levelly. 'You should have said something.'

'I didn't think it would do any good. And it wasn't just because you stood to make a lot of money out of the deal. How could I tell you that your father was...?' She glanced over at him warily. It was one thing for him to criticise his father, but quite another for her to do it. 'That he hadn't been particularly kind...' She finished weakly. 'I couldn't do it, Lucas, and then I got firmly enmeshed in the lies and became too nervous about telling you the truth.'

'Really?' One dark eyebrow lifted wryly.

'Yes, really.' She looked over at him steadily. 'I didn't want you to hate me...'

'So you just ran away?'

'I didn't run away. I just had to leave.' She swallowed hard. 'Don't you understand, Lucas? You were my father's enemy. And I'm all he's got.' Her green eyes held his earnestly. 'He's been through hell, worrying about losing his house, how could I tell him he was also losing me—that I'd taken up with the enemy?' Her voice trembled. 'The state he was in, it would have finished him off.'

'He's a lucky man to have someone so loyal to him,' Lucas said quietly.

'I didn't feel very loyal sometimes,' she murmured huskily, and then blushed as he looked over and met her eyes. 'Anyway...' She looked away from him hastily. 'I hope you'll forgive me.'

Lucas didn't say anything for a long moment, and Penny felt her nerves twist with unmerciful anxiety. 'Would you like a drink?' he asked finally, and turned away to the mini-bar behind him.

Was that all he was going to say? Penny stared at him in frustration. 'No. I've got to drive home.'

She watched as he poured himself a whisky.

'So this is home, is it?' he asked, turning to look at her again.

For a second Penny had a vivid image of sitting at Lucas's dining table, with the candlelight flickering between them and Isobel complaining that she would have preferred chips. She remembered standing in the kitchen, looking out at the rain and listening to the child's laughter upstairs as Lucas teased her about something. There had been a warm feeling of belonging in that house, the feeling of being a part of a family. She ached for that almost as much as she ached for Lucas to put his arms around her.

'This is home sometimes,' she said huskily. 'But I don't live here. I'm manageress of a beauty spa on board a cruise ship.'

Lucas watched the golden liquid swirl around the crystal glass. 'You are full of surprises, Ms Kennedy.'

Penny felt a lump wedge in her throat. It didn't sound as if Lucas would ever forgive her.

'And you made a hell of a PA,' he remarked casually.

Penny frowned. 'I was good at that job,' she said with a flash of annoyance, her old spirit returning. She glared at him. 'You know I was. I'm computer literate, and I can run an office like yours no problem.'

'Yes. That's what I said; you were a hell of a PA. How come you were so proficient in an office when it's not really your line?'

'I did an office management course years ago.' She shrugged, not really wanting to talk about such mundane things. But as silence stretched between them she found herself filling the space with more mundane conversation. 'Have you got someone else to replace me?'

'Why? Do you want your job back?' He grinned suddenly.

'No, I just wondered.' She frowned, wishing she hadn't asked. 'I've got my own job, and it's very rewarding. Honestly, you can be damned arrogant sometimes,' she muttered.

'If you really want to know I've missed you like crazy.' He finished his drink and put the empty glass down.

She glanced over at him, her heart unsteady now as she wondered if he was talking in a business sense or a personal one. 'Even though a moment ago you were telling me I was a damned hindrance?' She managed to sound slightly sardonic.

'You were.' He met her eyes levelly. 'You were a damn distraction.'

Her heart started to race as he walked across towards her. 'You are a distraction now. Sometimes I can hardly think straight when I look at you...do you know that?'

She looked up at him, unsure what direction his words were taking.

'You see, that's exactly what I'm talking about.' He shook his head. 'You look at me with those gorgeous eyes and things start to fragment in my mind...It happened the first day you walked into my office.' He reached out and caught hold of her hand, pulling her to her feet. 'I knew I should have asked you more questions—especially as I knew full well your CV wasn't right. But all I could think was...I want this woman to stay.'

Penny's heart leapt wildly.

‘That feeling hasn’t happened to me in a very long time,’ he finished huskily, his eyes on her lips.

‘Hasn’t it?’ She took a deep breath. ‘If you want to know the truth, something happened to me that day too. I walked in and you looked at me and I almost forgot why I was there. I think that was part of the reason why I fell so easily into the lie of being Mildred Bancroft.’

‘And then you left with equal ease. Have you any idea how I felt when I woke up and found you were gone? When I found that note?’ His voice hardened.

She opened her mouth to answer, but suddenly she was in his arms and he was kissing her with a punishing degree of passion. She clung to him, excitement and need racing like fire through her veins as she kissed him back.

‘I didn’t want to go, Lucas...I really didn’t,’ she breathed unsteadily, wrapping her arms up around his neck, hardly daring to believe that he was kissing her, that he seemed to have forgiven her. ‘I’m sorry...I’m sorry.’ She punctuated the words with kisses, trailing her fingers through the soft darkness of his hair, loving the feeling of being so close, of being able to touch him...love him.

‘No, I’m sorry,’ he murmured, kissing her back, his hands travelling up and over her body with slow, sensuous strokes. ‘Sorry I ever let you escape so easily. I can see now that I’m going to have to do something very radical about that...’

She pulled away from him, a small frown over her eyes.

‘And I can also see that I’m going to have to do something about the fact that you keep changing your name.’

‘I’m not going to change my name again, Lucas. Penny Kennedy is my name—I thought we’d cleared the air—’

‘We have.’ He kissed the tip of her nose, and then the frown from between her eyes. ‘I just think that to be on the safe side we should change it again—this time more permanently.’

‘Lucas, what are you talking about?’ She pulled further away from him.

‘I’m talking about changing your name to Mrs Lucas Darien,’ he said softly. ‘I want you to marry me, Penny...that way I hope that I can ensure you will stay around every day and every night for the rest of my life.’

She was so stunned she could hardly speak. He watched as the colour drained from her face.

‘Penny?’

‘Why are you asking me this?’ she asked huskily.

‘Because I’m in love with you.’ He answered her with deep sincerity. ‘And I don’t want to lose you ever again.’

The words made her mind reel with happiness, with disbelief. She stared up at him wordlessly for a few seconds and then her eyes filled with tears. ‘I thought...I wondered if you were seeing Emma again...’

‘Why would you think that?’

Penny shrugged awkwardly. ‘Because you sent her flowers...because Maria said you’d been the happiest she had known you in a long time when you were dating her.’

‘Emma was only ever just a friend. She wanted more from me than I could give her. The flowers were sent out of friendship, for her birthday, and I made it clear there was no other motive.’ He said the words steadily and reached to pull her close again. ‘She’s a very nice person, but just not right for me. In fact I had given up ever finding the right person again...until you walked into my office.’

A tear trickled down the smooth paleness of her skin. In these weeks apart from him she had dreamed of this, yearned for it, but she had never dared hope it would ever be possible.

‘Look, I know you have a fabulous job...and I know you value your freedom...but if you say yes, Penny, I will do everything in my power to make you happy. The fact is I’m crazy about you...no other reason in the world would make me propose.’

‘Oh, Lucas.’ Her voice wobbled precariously. ‘I’m crazy about you too...I adore you. I think I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you.’

She saw the light of happiness in his eyes as she said those words, and suddenly she was crushed in his arms and he was kissing her with such passion that it took her breath away. She clung to him, kissing him back, joy flooding through her with fierce intensity.

‘I can’t believe this is happening,’ she whispered as he pulled back slightly to look at her.

‘Neither can I. I didn’t think I could ever feel this happy again.’

‘I know.’ She bit down on her lip.

‘Hey, wait until Isobel hears our news—she’s going to be ecstatic.’

The words caused a flood of warmth and excitement to rush through her. ‘I’ve missed Isobel so much... how is she?’

‘Fine—she’s spending time with her grandma, but I’ve got to be back tomorrow.’ He looked down at her earnestly. ‘You will come back with me, won’t you?’

She nodded. ‘Try and stop me,’ she whispered softly. ‘As Shauna said, when you meet the man you want to spend the rest of your life with you want the rest of your life to start straight away...’

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